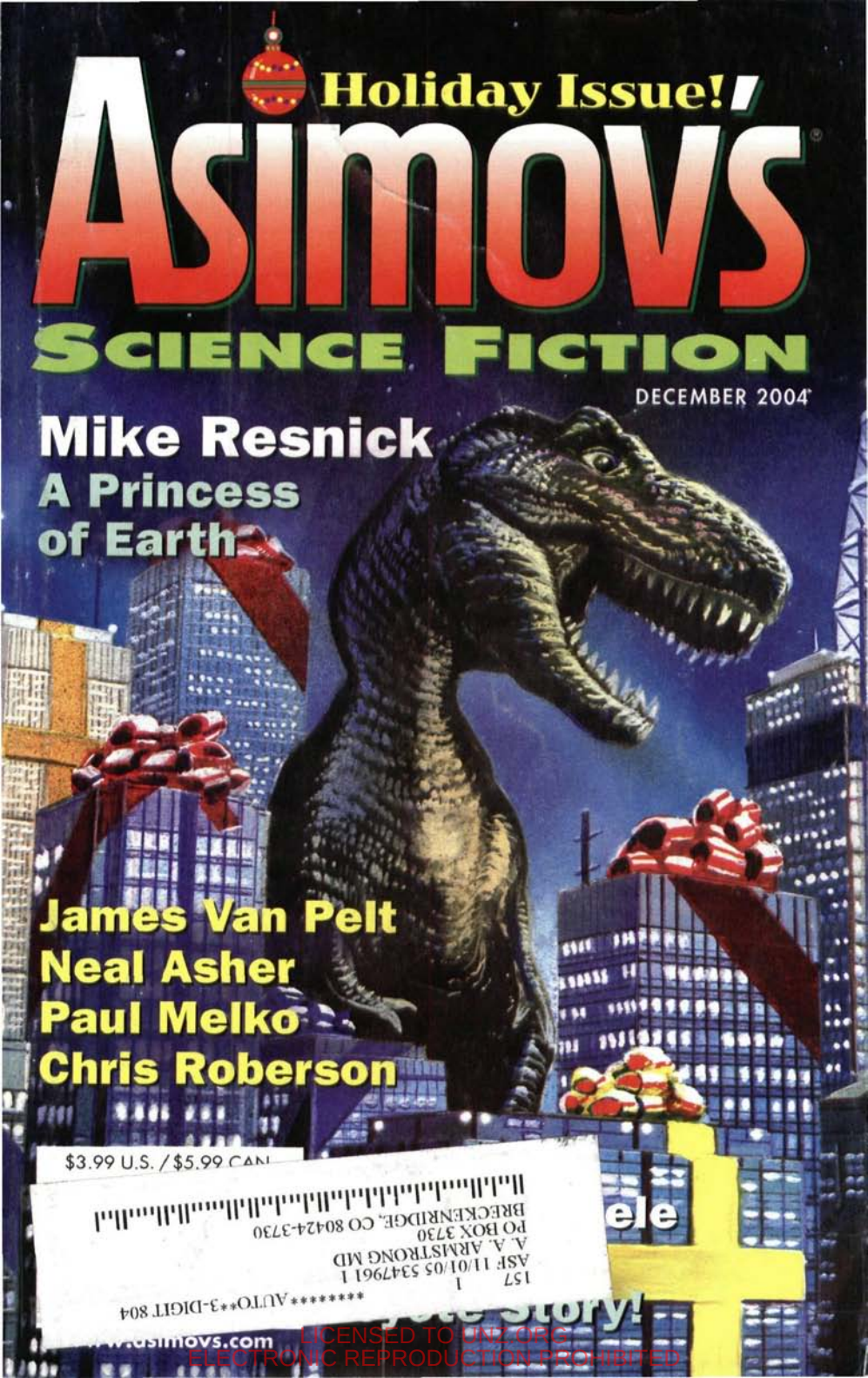

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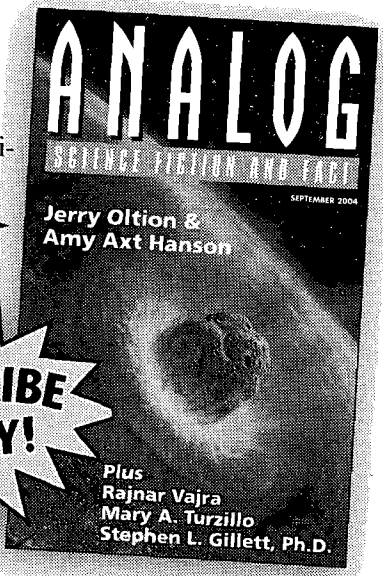

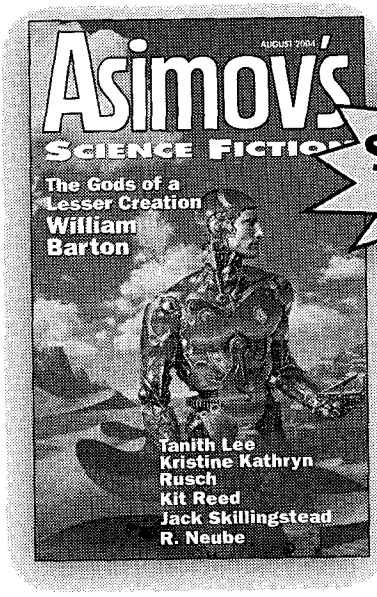

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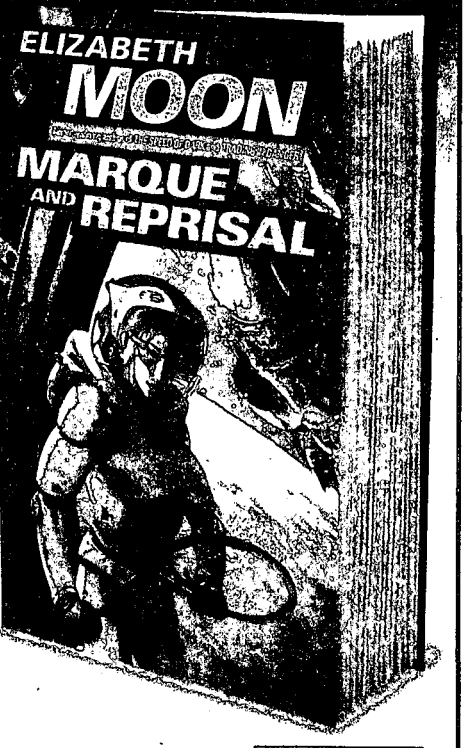

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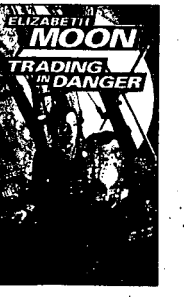

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

A POSTAGE STAMP FOR ISAAC

Isaac Asimov on a United States postage stamp?

There's a campaign going on to bring about just that. You can find out more about it, and what you can do to put the Good Doctor's lavishly bewhiskered face on our postage, by going to <*http://www.geocities.comArea51/Vault/4986/asimovstamp*>.

(And there's a fine, resounding twenty-first-century address for you, one that the creator of Susan Calvin and R. Daneel and so many other famed futuristic characters would surely find thrilling. Nothing so mundane, so prosaic, so old hat, as P.O. Box xxx, Church Street Station, New York, NY. Oh, no—Area51/Vault/4986, and don't forget the slashes. But if you don't want to bother keying in all that, just google for "asimovstamp" and you'll go right to it. Poor Isaac, to have missed out on all the delicious complexities of the http://www world!)

If such a stamp were to be issued, we science-fictioneers would, of course, savor a reversion to archaic postal methods for at least a little while, for the sheer fun of seeing Isaac looking back up at us from the envelope that we're about to mail. We wouldn't, of course, be communicating with each other that way, since we are all, by now, thoroughly enmeshed in the point-and-click e-mail world. But we could pay our utility bills with Isaac stamps, we could stick them on our credit-card payments, we could plaster them on the letters we write to members of Congress demanding immediate manned expeditions to the Moon, we—we—

An Isaac stamp? What a wonderful notion! Is it really something that could happen, though?

The Postal Service rules say that no commemorative stamps can be issued in honor of living people. That's why there are, so far, no Jimmy Carter postage stamps, no Ronald Reagan stamps, none honoring Barry Bonds or Clint Eastwood or John Glenn. Other countries have no compunction about honoring their heroes of the moment right in the middle of their fifteen minutes of Warholian fame, but we require a certain mellowing period first.

Isaac, though, has been gone from our midst since 1992, more than enough time to qualify him for philatelic immortality. And who among the readership of this magazine would be so rash as to say he doesn't deserve that immortality?

Consider some of the people who already have been on United States postage stamps. There was, back in 1940, a long series of Famous Americans stamps, which included such people as Mark Twain, Washington Irving, Eli Whitney, Alexander Graham Bell, Booker T. Washington, and John Philip Sousa, whose names are (I hope) all still recognizable to modern-day Americans, but also some, like Ethelbert Nevin, Daniel Chester French, and Crawford Long, who perhaps were

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Please do not send us your manuscript until you've gotten a copy of our manuscript guidelines. To obtain this, send us a self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope (what stationery stores call a number 10 envelope), and a note requesting this information. Please write "manuscript guidelines" in the bottom left-hand corner of the outside envelope. The address for this and for all editorial correspondence is *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the interest of time-saving, find out what we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story.

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vey Washington Wiley (he was the chief force behind the passing of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906), Ramon Magsaysay (a former president of the Philippines), Lajos Kossuth (a nineteenth-century Hungarian political leader), and Ephraim McDowell (who performed the first successful abdominal operation in 1809). There's even a stamp honoring Dante. These are all significant historical figures, I suppose, although if we were drawing up a list today of people in need of commemoration on our postage stamps I doubt that any of them would make the first hundred.

Still, a great poet, two important leaders of other countries, and two figures out of American medical history—can we hope to stack up a mere spinner of science fiction stories against them?

I'll try to demonstrate, in a moment, that Isaac wasn't all that mere. But let me continue to offer you, first, the names of some of the people who've made the grade with the U.S. Postal Service in recent times rather than in the austere old days when you had to be Washington or Jefferson to achieve postal glory.

For example, here's a bunch of football players: Bronco Nagurski, Ernie Nevers, Walter Camp, Red Grange. Great athletes all, sure. Still, just football players, not presidents or surgeons or creators of undying poetry. Here's a pack of movie actors: the horror guys, Bela Lugosi, Boris Karloff, Lon Chaney. us with his wisdom.

Here's a stamp for Marilyn Monroe, and for Audrey Hepburn. Here's one for Wild Bill Hickok. Helen Keller gets a stamp, and so does Will Rogers—does anyone under fifty know who he was?—and newspaper publisher Adolph Ochs. Dr Seuss has a stamp—well, all right—and country-music star Roy Acuff and film-music conductor Henry Mancini.

Here's one for *Daffy Duck,* for God's sake, and one for Prince Valiant, and one for Dick Tracy (Little Orphan Annie and Popeye too, and, for us sci-fi types, Flash Gordon.) Here we have a passel of ancient baseball stars, and aviator Billy Mitchell, and movie bad-guy Edward G. Robinson. Irving Berlin. Houdini. Andy Warhol gets his fifteen minutes of postal fame. E.T. even, has a stamp. So do assorted spiders, teddy bears, reptiles, carnivorous plants, and bats.

You get the idea. The United States issues thirty or forty postage stamps a year, and in the aggregate they reflect the whole range of American cultural and political history from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Well, then, why not a stamp for Isaac Asimov, whose range ran from the sublime to the ridiculous all in one remarkable human being?

"Just a science fiction writer," someone might say.

Part of that is true. He *was* a science fiction writer, whose Three

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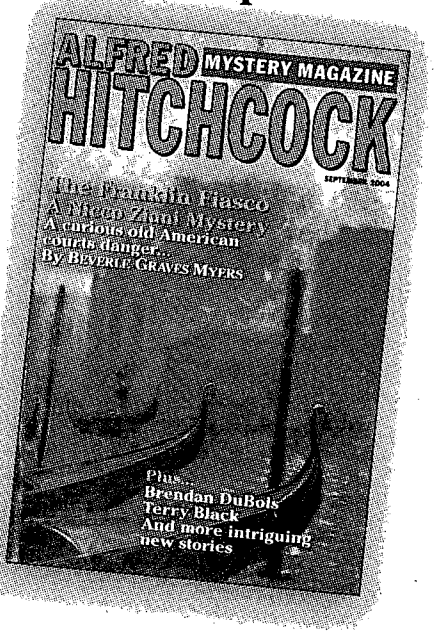

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Laws of Robotics provided nifty fodder for fantastic story plots sixty years ago, but also established much of the conceptual basis for the real-life robots that are going to be everywhere in our lives before this present century gets a whole lot older. His Foundation novels told tall tales of far-future galactic empires, but they also brought our own world's actual history to life in vivid metaphorical reconstruction. In such classic works as "The Ugly Little Boy" and "The Bicentennial Man" Isaac introduced a powerful note of compassion and pathos to such well-worn science fictional themes as robotics and time travel and gave them new emotional resonance.

A science fiction writer, yes. But not *just* a science fiction writer. In hundreds of carefully constructed books and perhaps a thousand shorter works he made science and history accessible to two generations of readers. Isaac was the Great Explainer, taking all knowledge as his province and expounding on it in that wonderfully lucid, irresistible, inimitable style of his. Among his multitudes of books we find such titles as *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare, Asimov's Biographical Encyclopedia of Science and Technology, Asimov's Guide to the Bible, Asimov's Guide to Science, Asimov's Annotated 'Paradise Lost,'* and on and on and on, what in almost any other writer would be a vast monument to *chutzpah* but which for Isaac Asimov is simply a record of the infinite range of his astonishing mind. In an era when public education in America was producing the sorriest of results Isaac Asimov functioned as a one-man private university, teaching everything that anyone needed to know to everyone who came within reach of his work.

He was an invaluable public personality, too. I'm not talking about the Isaac often encountered at SF conventions, the irrepressible clown always quick with an improvised limerick, a song, a bawdy joke. I mean the Isaac of the television news programs, always the voice of reason in time of crisis, patiently explaining the latest horrendous event, setting it in context, elaborating on its implications for our society: a serious man, a *public* man, a responsible and invaluable citizen who just happened to be smarter than most other citizens and was willing to place that formidable intelligence at our service whenever it was needed.

Even if we discount all of that and simply look upon him as "just a science fiction writer," what's the objection to honoring him purely for that? His stories and novels gave pleasure to millions. We already have a Literary Arts series of stamps that has included such writers as Ayn Rand, Ogden Nash, and Zora Neale Hurston. Each of them was significant in one way or another, but can one say that Isaac Asimov's collected works are a lesser achievement than Ogden Nash's clever jingles or Ayn Rand's grim fantasies of staunch economic determinism?

Or, if there's no place for him among the Literary Arts honorees, why not a whole series of stamps for science fiction writers? The Postal Service has managed to honor sports figures, movie stars, photographers, composers of movie music, choreographers, female journalists, and any number of other specialized groups, including, indeed, spiders, reptiles, teddy bears, carnivorous plants, and bats. Could it not

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manage a little string of stamps for Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, John W. Campbell, Clifford D. Simak, Theodore Sturgeon, and L. Sprague de Camp? Great Britain has managed to give Arthur C. Clarke a knighthood. Can we not at least put some of our great SF people on our stamps?

A nice fantasy, that. But perhaps its time has not yet come. Let's start simply with an Isaac stamp. Visit the Internet address I provided at the beginning of this piece for more information. Or just send a note to the group that actually decides whose faces go on our stamps:

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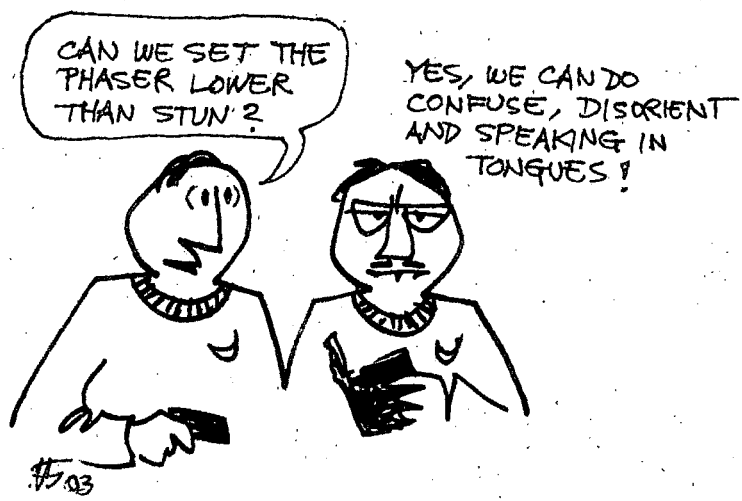
Isaac on a stamp! (Designed, perhaps, by Kelly Freas.) What a delicious idea! Let's get working on it right away. O



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On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

EBOOKS AGAIN?

not dead yet

Although ebooks have come a long way since we **last discussed them** <*http://www.jimkelly.net/pages/e_books.htm*> in March of 2001, many pundits would cite their perceived lackluster performance in the marketplace as proof that they were just another dot.com fad. Well, it ain't necessarily so. Sales of ebooks rose 27 percent in 2003, to $7.3 million, according to **Publisher's Weekly** <*http://www.publishersweekly.com*> citing statistics from the **Open eBook Forum** <*http://www.openebook.org*>, the electronic publishing industry's trade organization. Unit sales increased a whopping 71 percent to 1.3 million. And that's just a snapshot of for-profit ebook publishing; it doesn't take into account the gajillions of worthy self-published ebooks given away free to all comers. Closer to home, consider that all of the ebook publishers I mentioned in my previous column are still in business, thank you very much. Consider also that many of you are perusing an ebook version of this column using a digital reader, either **Adobe** <*http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html*> or **Palm** <*http://www.palmdigitalmedia.com*> or **Microsoft** <*http://www.microsoft.com/reader/downloads/pc.asp*> or **Mobipocket** <*http://www.mobipocket.com/en/HomePage/default.asp*> or one of an ever-expanding galaxy of less well known software. However, ebooks do not yet threaten publishing with a business plan meltdown in the same way that cheap CD burners and mp3 file-sharing have disrupted the music industry.

And why is that? Most of us would be hard pressed to hear the difference between a song played from a CD and the same song played from an MP3 file and, of course, there is *no difference* between a music CD and a duplicate burned to a blank CD-R disk—other than the gaudy packaging. What keeps print from making the great leap forward into the digital age are the unsurpassed (as yet) ergonomics of the dead tree book.

lovely

In August of 2003 **Jeff VanderMeer** <*http://www.jeffvandermeer.com*> and **Fantastic Metropolis** <*http://www.fantasticmetropolis.com*> published a fascinating **survey** <*http://www.fantasticmetropolis.com/show.html?iw.books*> that featured a clutch of writers, artists, and editors talking about their love affair with books as physical objects. Jeff asked whether these celebrated book folk had any special rituals they practiced after

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acquiring a new book and whether they thought books still needed to exist in a digital world. He also asked if they would cite examples of well-made books and if they had any special memories connected with books. And who responded? Here are just a few of the many: **Michael Chabon** <*http://www.michaelchabon.com*>: "(I like) The way a book can serve as a repository for a photograph, a ticket stub, a feather or a leaf," **Ellen Datlow** <*http://www.datlow.com*>: "I feel a thrill when I find a particular out-of-print book I've searched for a long time or upon rediscovering (physically) certain books that meant a lot to me as a child," **Neil Gaiman** <*http://www.neilgaiman.com*>: "(I like) The smell of paper, the way the book feels, the look of it, the heft,"and **Mary Doria Russell** <*http://literati.net/Russell*>: "As an anthropologist and as a novelist, books have always been my tools. I treat them like a mechanic treats a set of socket wrenches." **Peter Straub** said <*http://www.peterstraub.net*>: "I sniff old books, not new books" **Gene Wolfe** <*http://mysite.verizon.net/~vze2tmhh/wolfe.html*>: "I wish I could say that physical books are necessary, but I sincerely doubt it," **L. Timmel Duchamp** <*http://ltimmel.home.mindspring.com*>: "The book as material object speaks to me, always, of its history," **M. John Harrison** <*http://www.mjohnharrison.com*>: "I read books with an exaggerated care, presumably as a result of childhood warnings to 'respect' them," and **Tanith Lee** <*http://www.tanithlee.com*>: "(I like) Everything. Touch, smell, appearance. Content, of course." If you want to read some truly eloquent defenses of the paper book, check this out.

functional

Now I'm not about to argue with my distinguished friends and colleagues—I participated in that survey as well! Of course I agree that paper books are beautiful. But are they the final word in reading? Do ebooks have any inherent advantages over paper books? Well, sure. Consider the environmental impacts of the paper book, not only at the beginning but also at the end of its useful life. In comparison, an ebook never wears out. The cover won't fade or get torn off. No matter how many times you read one, the binding doesn't fail and release crucial pages at random into a cruel and uncaring world. Ebooks won't turn yellow or smell musty. Silverfish? Not!

But wait, there's more! In February of 2004, **Cory Doctorow** <*http://www.craphound.com/*>, Campbell-award-winning writer and my nominee for science fiction's alpha-geek, made a compelling case for ebooks at the **O'Reilly Emerging Technology Conference** <*http://conferences.oreillynet.com/etech*>. You may have heard of Cory's gutsy ploy of making his first two novels available for free downloading simultaneously with their paper publication by **TOR Books** <*http://www.tor.com*> with the blessing of his editor **Patrick Nielsen-Hayden** <*http://nielsenhayden.com/electrolite*>. I heartily recommend that you read Cory's speech, **Ebooks: Neither E, Nor Books** <*http://www.craphound.com/ebooks neither enorbooks.txt*> in its entirety, but here are some highlights:

> Ebooks are almost infinitely mutable. You can turn them into webpages, send them to a publisher to be printed on pa-

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per, format them at home however you please (large print, double columns), have your computer read them aloud to you or send them to your cousin in Stuttgart. You can carry hundreds of them around on a flash memory stick the size of a Bic lighter. You can find any ebook in your elibrary at the tap of a few keys and search that book in an instant for a place or a character or a memorable quote.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, some of you are saying, *but I don't like to read books off my screen and besides, I can't take them to the beach or read them in the tub.* Cory responds to this objection with his two certainties (maybe these should be CAPITALIZED as in THE TWO CERTAINTIES): "1. More people are reading more words off more screens every day. 2. Fewer people are reading fewer words off fewer pages every day." The consequences of The Two Certainties are profound: at some point the ascending digital line must cross the descending print line. Not *if,* friends, but *when.* The Two Certainties point to a future in which ebooks inevitably dominate paper books. This might come to pass because print will die back when we print-reading dinosaurs die off. Meanwhile the digital generation will have become accustomed to reading off screens, and may even prefer them. Or it might happen because of some breakthrough in display technology, driven by economic pressure to take advantage of the superior functionality of the ebook, which will make believers out of even the crustiest of print fans.

We interrupt this column for a brief rant.

Maybe what's holding ebooks back from wider acceptance aren't readability problems, but a nomenclature gap. What the hell are we supposed to call these things? Are they ebooks or eBooks or Ebooks or e-books or E-books? I've seen all of these formulations used. My spell checker thinks they're e-books but I have a contract with an e-publisher who says they're eBooks. Proofreaders across the country are snapping their red pencils in frustration. Come on, efolk! Get your act together!

Sorry, but I just had to get that off my chest. Now, back to the column.

You know, thirty some years ago you couldn't bring your personal music library to the beach either. At the dawn of the Age of the **Walkman** <*http://pocketcalculatorshow.com/walkman/history.html*> that cutting edge gizmo cost $150 and it only played one or at most two albums—you had to tote a case full of cassettes if you wanted any kind of selection. Now you can buy yourself an **Ipod** <*http://www.apple.com/ipod*> or one of its myriad knockoffs and stick "10,000 songs in your pocket" according to the ad campaign. And are you surprised that you can do this? No way—you read *Asimov's.* You're a science fiction fan, ferchrissakes! Do you seriously doubt that E-Ink and **digital paper** <*http://www.research.philips.com/InformationCenter/Global/FArticleDetail.asp?lArticleId=2817*> are on the horizon and will certainly arrive in your lifetime? Guess what? **Sony** <*http://www.eink.com/news/releases/pr70.html*> is betting that they've already arrived.

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I should say here that I have long been one of those saurians who disliked reading for pleasure from a computer screen. But a couple of months ago, for reasons too boring to mention, I popped for a **personal digital assistant (PDA)** <*http://www.pdastreet.com*>, mostly to keep track of appointments and addresses when I was away from my desk. As it happened, shortly after I made the buy, I went to Florida to attend the **International Conference on the Fantastic** <*http://www.iafa.org*> and to soak up some rays. On a whim, I loaded some ebooks into my new gadget. By the time I got off the plane in Fort Lauderdale I'd fallen in love with my PDA as a reading device. Yes, the screen is smallish but I can change the font at will. Maybe it isn't exactly ideal for the beach because direct light washes out the backlit screen, but my days of sunbathing are over and this thing is made in the shade. Often as not it's my book of choice for bedtime reading. And if my wife wants to turn in, we can douse all the lights and I can read from that cheerily lit screen.

The other night as I was looking at **Jeffrey Ford's** <*http://users.rcn.com/delicate*> wonderful **The Empire of Ice Cream** <*http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/originals/originals_archive/ford4/*>, I flashed on how very pleased an SF-crazed eleven-year-old named Jimmy Kelly would've been in 1962 to learn that in the future they would invent a neat-o kind of book that made it unnecessary to read under the blankets with a flashlight after bedtime.

exit

If in fact ebooks are our future, then we readers are about to step onto the roller coaster that music fans have been riding for the past few years. When you buy an ebook, what rights are you acquiring? You can lend your paper copy of *Asimov's* to your brother-in-law when you're finished with it, but are you allowed to lend him your ebook version of this magazine? These are crucial questions—ones that Cory Doctorow addresses in his prescient essay on ebooks. Next time we'll hear more from Cory and look at the impact of copywrongs on our little corner of literature. ○

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THE CHRISTMAS TREE

Peter Friend

The author of this remarkable Christmas story has been published in a variety of science fiction and other periodicals—especially children's magazines—but this is his first tale for us. In real life, he's a computer analyst, who hopes to one day become "a full-time living art treasure."

"Grandma, I found a ripe Christmas tree!" I shouted as I burst into the Elderhouse.

Several Elders muttered in surprise and nudged each other awake.

Grandma lowered her knitting needles and glared at me. "Bloona, if this is another one of your 'exaggerations,' you're in a great deal of trouble, do you hear me? There hasn't been a ripe Christmas tree in these parts since well before you were born. Where exactly did you see this tree?"

I opened my mouth, then stopped, realizing too late that I was in trouble now no matter what I said. "Blackstone Valley," I admitted.

Elder Tarshlis gave a long chuckle and shuffled over to the treasure shelves.

Grandma ignored him and stood, clutching her walking stick. "You've been warned often enough, Bloona. That valley's no place for children. It's full of dangerous wild vegetation."

"Including one ripe Christmas tree," I reminded her.

She rolled her eyes. "All right, all right, I suppose we'd better check. At least it's a pleasant day for a walk, even a wasted walk." She grabbed me by the collar as if I were a second walking stick, and nudged me out the door.

"Wait," came a wheezy voice behind us. It was Elder Tarshlis, struggling to pull something long and dusty from the highest shelf. It fell to the floor with a great clatter, waking half a dozen annoyed Elders. "You'll need a north pole," he insisted, wiping dust from the long staff with his sleeve.

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"Oh very well, just in case," said Grandma. "Bloona, you'll carry it for me, please."

That was a fine idea, I thought, until I lifted the carved pole and realized how heavy it was. I carried it outside, attracting the attention of passers-by, especially when I turned without thinking and the pole nearly knocked Grandma over.

"Bloona's found a ripe Christmas tree," announced Elder Tarshlis to everyone at the top of his quavery voice.

"Go back inside, you old fool," ordered Grandma. "It's time for your nap."

He grinned toothlessly, well pleased with himself, and shuffled back into the Elderhouse.

By the time we reached the village's boundary walls, the news had spread and we had a dozen uninvited followers—my father, always happy for any excuse to leave his vegetable plots; Argod and Dree, carrying their smallest daughter Fliss; Shaluna, the village's head gossip; a handful of other idlers: busybodies, curious children, and a small enthusiastic dog.

Grandma paused and glared at them, clearly trying to think of a good excuse to order them back home, too. She sighed and resumed walking. "Ah well, perhaps there's some safety in numbers. And if there's no sign of this tree of yours, they can all take turns spanking you."

"Yes, Grandma," I mumbled, hoping that the tree hadn't moved.

The chattering behind us grew quieter as we reached the valley. Scurdle bushes pointed jagged leaves at us, handweed gestured obscenely, and tangleblooms dripped sticky poison. The dog sniffed at a flowering toeclipper, whined, and fled back to the village, followed by two nervous children. Father fingered his axe.

"You picked yourself a fine playground," Grandma told me dryly.

"I wasn't playing," I protested. "I heard the tree ringing its bells, just like in your stories, so I came in to investigate. It's not far now. I remember I could see it from this big rock ahead."

But the tree wasn't there. I stopped, unable to breathe, sick with embarrassment. This was the right spot, I was sure, but only a churned patch of mud remained to show where the tree had been a few hours ago.

"Silence!" ordered Grandma.

And amongst the forest noises, we heard gentle tinkling. I exhaled in relief.

We followed the sound, and soon came to a boggy spot near a stream, and there was the tree. It seemed to be eating a rabbit—well, something furry that oozed blood.

We oohed and aahed from a safe distance, gazed up at the dark green branches and the seductively tinkling red fruit, and inhaled the wonderful scent. All Christmas trees smell sweet, of course—that's how they attract their prey—but a ripe tree was even better, like cinnamon and fresh-baked honeybread and berried custard.

Grandma released my collar and ruffled my hair. "My apologies for doubting you, Bloona. It's magnificent. And ripe enough to harvest later this summer, if heaven wills it. Give me the north pole."

She squinted sunward to calculate north. With my help, she rammed

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the pole into the soft earth as close to the tree as she dared. Sensing the movement, the tree lashed out with its tendrils, curling back in disappointment when it tasted only the pole.

"I hereby claim this tree on behalf of Tlakshomm village," Grandma announced. "May heaven bless its harvest."

Everyone cheered and yelled. In all the excitement, little Fliss tripped over and rolled near the tree, which immediately lassoed her with sticky tendrils and dragged her towards its mouths. She giggled, too young to realize her peril. Argod and Dree screamed, threw themselves onto her and drew their knives, and Father ran forward with his axe.

"Put away those blades, you fools," shouted Grandma. "We mustn't injure it or we'll never see it again—is that what you want?"

Even a tree this big wasn't strong enough to pull in two determined adults and a child, but, being a tree, it was too stupid to know that. I knew what we had to do—I'd nearly been swallowed by a smaller unripe Christmas tree a few years ago, and still had the long pale scars to prove it. Together, we carefully unwrapped tendrils from Fliss and her parents. The tree objected to this, and we were soon busy pulling tendrils from our own limbs too, but the tree was outnumbered and a few anxious minutes later it ungraciously let go.

"My, quite a feisty one," Grandma said, ignoring the howling girl now safe in the arms of her sobbing parents, all three of them striped with tendril lashes. "Well, don't just stand there, everyone—if we want it to stay here, we'll have to feed it, and feed it well."

"With what? Our own children? Is this what you call a blessing?" shouted Dree.

"Christmas trees are perfectly safe if you keep your distance," said Grandma cheerily. "Mutual respect, that's all they ask for. And regular meals."

Still upset, Argod and Dree returned to the village, carrying Fliss. Shaluna accompanied them, and I knew that for once her gossiping would have Grandma's approval. The whole village must be told this news, as tending a ripening Christmas tree was work for many hands.

Over the next day or so, most of the village trooped out to see the tree at least once, and none dared risk Grandma's wrath by arriving without gifts. The tree seemed to enjoy the attention. It sank its roots further into the mud and gobbled every gift we flung at it—handfuls of snails and worms collected by dirt-smeared children, pots of spoiled jam, rabbit and bird carcasses, weevil-gnawed peelervine blossoms, a honeycomb still futilely defended by its bees, a long-dead goat dripping maggots. The tree wasn't fussy, which was fortunate, for we weren't a wealthy village—not yet, anyway.

Grandma set up camp beneath a neighboring dorfwood, and appointed herself as Mother Christmas and me as her elf. Everyone knew such an important decision should really be for the full Elder council to make, but no one seemed to mind. Father was downright proud that I'd been so honored, and hugged me for the first time since my mother died.

But after a few days, I realized that being an elf mostly meant running to Tlakshomm village and back with Grandma's messages. Between mes-

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sages, she lectured me on my elf duties for the harvest ceremony, and how I'd bring eternal shame, poverty, and misfortune to Tlakshomm if I mucked up the ceremony in the slightest.

Back at the village, Elder Jensil and Elder Ulrid taught me to carve. We made dozens of cups from well-seasoned muskwood, and two angels—one for the ceremony and a much less elaborate practice one. I carved the wings, and only cut myself twice. Then they started training me with the angel, which turned out to be a lot harder than I'd expected.

A month later, the tree still looked much the same to me, although Grandma insisted that it was ripening. Then I noticed the upper sides of the branches fade to white. She said this was snow fungus, an excellent sign.

"Can we wear the funny hats now?" I asked.

"Not until the ceremony, I told you that before. We're still on schedule for the summer solstice—that's the most blessed time for a harvest."

"But that's ages away!"

"Only three weeks, child! Honestly, you've no more patience than your father, and no doubt will grow up to be just as bad a farmer. A few weeks is but an instant to a tree that bears fruit only twice in a human lifetime. Stop that fidgeting. If you're so terribly bored, go back to the village and help the Elders with their preparations—some clear eyes and nimble fingers would be welcome, I'm sure. And Elder Jensil tells me you need more angel practice."

So I went. Helping Elder Tarshlis ferment vegetable peelings wasn't much fun, but it was better than watching a tree. I quite liked sitting in the Elderhouse and watching the polished brass still as it bubbled and steamed and dripped "Christmas spirit" (as Elder Tarshlis called it) into a barrel. He and the other Elders spent a lot of time tasting the results, giggling and lengthily comparing it with other batches of spirit they claimed to remember from years long past.

And, of course, I practiced with the angel every day. I was improving, I thought, although the Elders still frowned and shook their heads and agreed they hadn't been nearly so clumsy when they were young.

A week before the solstice, I began feeding our two best goats with clover and sweet herbs each evening. And on solstice eve, I collected all the eggs I could find.

Grandma woke me very early on solstice morning, wearing a tall red Mother Christmas hat with white rabbit fur on the brim and the point. She handed me a smaller elf hat of shiny green leather. It was too large for my head, and fell over my eyes until I padded it with a handful of straw.

Father and I milked the sleepy goats, then carried the pails through the darkness to the Elderhouse, which was already abuzz with activity and broken eggshells. The festive eggnog was mixed by the Elders to some ancient recipe, which seemed to me to consist mostly of spirit and very little milk or egg. It was spiced, tasted, adjusted and retasted several times, until Grandma lost patience and pronounced it good and ready.

The entire village set out in procession, frailer Elders and the festive eggnog barrel carried on hand carts. By the time we reached the Christ-

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mas tree, sunrise was close, one cart had been abandoned with a broken wheel, several small children were crying from handweed stings and scurdle jabs, and Grandma was fretting that we were late.

I handed out wooden cups of eggnog to everyone, and wished each person a hurried "merry Christmas tree" as Grandma had directed.

"Everyone ready?" she asked as the first rays of the rising sun hit us. "Just in time, thank heaven. Tarshlis, get that cup away from your mouth! All right then, all together now . . . throw!"

A fair amount of eggnog ended up on the ground or in people's hair, but most hit the tree.

I pulled the north pole from the hardened mud. The tree didn't seem to notice. My hands shaking a little, I lit the candle held in the angel's carved hands and hooked the angel onto the pole, took a deep breath and swung the pole at the tree with all my strength. For one horrible moment, I thought I'd missed, but then the angel stuck in an upper branch, the eggnog caught light, and the whole tree was bathed in soft blue flame. The tree itself wasn't burning—there was no smell of smoke, just that wonderful ripe Christmas tree smell, now stronger than ever.

Everyone cheered, except Grandma and the other Elders, who glanced at each other as if waiting for something. Then the swollen fruit started to creak and groan, and now all the Elders smiled, even Grandma.

"A new happy year to us all," she yelled. Everyone knew this was the signal to take cover—we'd heard the Elders' stories often enough—but most of us remained spellbound by the flaming tree until its fruit suddenly exploded. Huge black seeds whistled through the air, and we dived for any cover we could find.

A minute later, the bombardment was over. I nervously sat up from behind a large log, and winced in pain. My shoulder was stained red, which at first I feared to be blood, but no, it was just pulp and juice from a seed the size of my fist. Its impact had left me with a huge bruise, but no worse than that.

Looking around, I saw that mine was not the only injury—many of us sported burns, cuts, and bruises. Half the children were in tears. Elder Tarshlis had a broken finger. Grandma herself had lost her hat, an eyebrow, and most of her left hair braid. She was still smiling though.

"Find those seeds, every last one," she yelled. "They're worth their weight in silver at the spice markets of Flejister, and heaven's blessings mustn't be wasted." She wiped her brow and sat on the log beside me. "Ah, Bloona, I do enjoy a good traditional Christmas, don't you?" ○

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EXCUSES WHY YOUR MONSTER HUSBAND CANNOT COME TO THE PHONE

Too busy tying
the children in knots.

Needs a few more shots
of Chivas before he is
"ready to confront reality."

Contemplating below his navel.

Cut himself badly while
shaving his forehead.

Refuses to speak to anyone
until he runs out of
insulting names to call you.

Currently frothing at the
mouth with no end in sight.

You already buried him
in the cellar.

—Bruce Boston

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STRENGTH ALONE

Paul Melko

Paul Melko lives in Ohio with his wife and two children. He spends his spare time writing, gardening, and defending his sprouts against little fuzzy, yet devious, bunnies. He tells us that negotiations have failed in the wake of the Trojan watering can incident. "Strength Alone" is part of a series of stories about an unusual branch of humanity.

I am strength.

I am not smart, that is Moira. I cannot articulate, like Meda. I do not understand the math that Quant does, and I cannot move my hands like Manuel. My world is not the fields of force that Bola sees.

If to anyone, you would think I am closest to Manuel; his abilities are in his hands, in his dexterity. But his mind is jagged sharp; he remembers things and knows them for us. Trivial information that he spins into memory.

No, I am closest to Moira. Perhaps because she is everything I am not. She is as beautiful as Meda, I think. If she were a singleton, she would still be special. If the pod were without me, I think, they would be no worse off. If I were removed, the pod would still be Apollo Papadopulos, and still be destined to become the starship captain we were built to be. We are all humans individually, and I think my own thoughts, but *together,* we are something different, something better, though my contribution is nothing like the others'.

When I think this, I wall it off. Bola looks at me; can he smell my despair? I smile, hoping he cannot see past my fortifications. I touch his hand, our pads sliding together, mixing thoughts, and send him a chemical memory of Moira and Meda laughing as children, holding hands. They are three- or four-years-old in the memory, so it is after we have pod-bonded, prior to Third State, but still in the crèche. Their hair is auburn, and it hangs from their heads in baloney curls. Moira has a skinned knee, and she isn't smiling as largely as Meda. In the memory, in the distant past, Meda reaches for Bola, who reaches for Manuel, who reaches for Quant, who touches my hand, and we all feel Meda's joy at seeing the squirrel in the meadow, and Moira's anger at falling down and scaring it

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off. Here on the mountain, there is a pause in our consensus, as everyone catches the memory.

Moira smiles, but Meda says, "We have work to do, Strom."

We do, I know we do. I feel my face redden. I feel my embarrassment spread in the air, even through our parkas.

Sorry. My hands form the word, as the thought passes among us.

We are somewhere in the Rocky Mountains. Our teachers have dropped us by air car, here near the tree line, and told us to survive for five days. They have told us nothing else. Our supplies are those we could gather in the half-hour they gave us.

For seven weeks, we and our classmates have trained in survival methods: desert, forest, jungle. Not that we will see any of these terrains in space. Not that we will find climates of any kind whatsoever, except for deadly vacuum, and *that* we know how to survive.

On the first day of survival training, our teacher, Theseus, had stood before us and screamed in volleying bursts. He was a duo, the most basic form of pod, just two individual humans bound together.

"You are being taught to think!" yelled Theseus on the left.

"You are being taught to respond to unknown environments, under unknown and strenuous conditions!" continued Theseus on the right.

"You do not know what you will face!"

"You do not know what will allow you to survive and what will kill you!"

Two weeks of class instruction followed, and then week after week, we had been transported to a different terrain, a different locale, and shown what to do to survive. But always with Theseus nearby. Now, in our final week, we are alone, just the students on this mountain.

"Apollo Papadopulos! Cold-weather survival! Twenty kilos per pod member! Go!" one of Theseus had yelled at us from our dorm-room doorway.

Luckily, the parkas were in the closet of our dorm room. Luckily, we had a polymer tent. Hagar Julian has only canvas coats with no insulation, we know. They will have a harder time of it.

Twenty kilograms is not a lot. I carry sixty kilos of it myself, and distribute the rest to my podmates. In the aircar, we note that Hagar Julian and Elliott O'Toole have split the load evenly among themselves; they are not playing to their strengths.

Strom! Once again, Meda chastises me, and I jerk my hands away from Manuel's and Quant's, but they can still smell the embarrassment pheromones. I cannot stop the chemical proof of my chagrin from drifting in the frigid air. I reach again for my place in the consensus, striving to be an integral part of the pod, trying to concentrate. Together, we can do anything.

Chemical thoughts pass from hand to hand in our circle, clockwise and counterclockwise, suggestions, lists, afterthoughts. Some thoughts are marked by their thinker, so that I know it is Bola who has noted the drop in temperature and the increased wind-speed, which causes us to raise the priority of shelter and fire. Consensus forms.

We have to rig our shelter before dark. We have to start a fire before dark. We have to eat dinner before dark. We have to dig a latrine.

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The list passes among us. We reach consensus on decision after decision, faster than I can reason through some of the issues: I add what I can. But I trust the pod. The pod is me.

Our hands are cold; we have removed our gloves to think. In the cold of the Rockies our emotions—the pheromones that augment our chemical thoughts—are like lightning, though sometimes the wind will whisk the feeling away before we can catch it. With gloves on our touch pads and parkas over our noses and neck glands, it is hard to think. Almost, it is like working alone, until we finish some sub-task and join for a quick consensus, shedding gloves.

"Strom, gather wood for the fire," Moira reminds me.

I am strength, so the tasks that require broad shoulders fall to me. I step away from the others, and I am suddenly cut off from them: no touch, no smell. We practice this, being alone. We were born alone, yet we have spent our youth, from First State to Fourth State, striving to be a single entity. And now we practice being alone again. It is a skill. I look back at the other five. Quant touches Moira's hand, passing a thought, some shared confidence. The spike of jealousy must be the face of my fear. If they have thought something important, I will know it later, when we rejoin. For now, I must act alone.

We have chosen an almost-flat tract of land in a meager grove of wind-stunted pines. The rock slopes gently away into a V shape, a catch for wind and snow. The shallow ravine drops sharply into a ledge of rock, the side of a long valley of snowdrifts and rock that the air car passed over as we arrived. Above us is a sheer wall, topped with a mass of snow and ice. I cannot see the peak from here; we are many hundreds of meters below it. Stretching in either direction are lines of jagged mountain tops, their white faces reflecting the afternoon sun. Clouds seem to bump against their western sides.

The snow is thin enough on the ground here that we can reach the rocky ground beneath it. The trees will shelter us from the wind and provide support for the tent lines, we hope. I walk down the gentle slope, along the line of pines.

We have no axe, so I must gather fallen logs and branches. This will be a problem. We cannot have a good fire with half-decayed logs. I file the thought away for later consensus.

I find a sundered pine branch, thick as my forearm, sticky with sap. I wonder if it will burn, as I drag it back up to the camp. I should have climbed up to find wood, I realize, so that I could drag it *down* to the camp. It is obvious now, and would have been obvious before if I had asked for consensus.

I drop my wood in the clearing the others have made and start to arrange it into a fireplace. I draw stones into a U-shape, the open end facing the wind down the mountain for a draft. The stones at the sides can be used for cooking.

Strom, that is where the tent will go!

I jump back, and I realize that I had been working without consensus, making decisions on my own.

Sorry.

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Confused and embarrassed, I drag the stones and wood away from the tent clearing. I think that I am not well, but I suppress that as I sweep snow away and place the stones again.

We decide to gauge our classmates' progress, so I climb the trail above the tree line to see how the rest of our class is doing. There are five of us on survival training, all of us classmates, all of us familiar with each other and in competition. It is how it has always been among us.

Each is destined to be a starship pilot. Or so we think. How many master pilots can the *Consensus* have? Not more than one. Will there be other ships for the rest of us to pilot? None are being built. Will the rest of us be allowed a lesser rank or position in the ship? Would we want it? These are questions we have asked ourself often.

How the rest are doing is important.

Above the tree line and to the west half a kilometer away, I see our classmate Elliott O'Toole's tent already up, with the pod inside it. To the east, a few hundred meters away, I see another student—Hagar Julian—working in the snow, instead of on an area of rocky slope. They are digging into a drift, perhaps to form a snow cave. They will have a long time to dig, I think. Hollowing out a space for six will expend much energy. They can't have a fire.

The other two pods are hidden in the trees beyond Hagar Julian. I cannot determine their progress, but I know from experience that our greatest competition will be from Julian and O'Toole.

I return, and pass the others memories of what I have seen.

We have begun pitching the tent, using the nearby pine trees to support it. We have no ground spikes, removed from the packs to reach the twenty-kilogram-per-person limit. There are many things we have removed to make our weight limit, but not matches. I kneel to start the fire.

Strom!

The scent call is sharp on the crisp wind. The pod is waiting for me to help pull and tie the tent support lines; they have consensed without me. Sometimes they do that. When it is expedient. I understand; they can reach a valid consensus without me easily enough.

We pull the spider-silk lines taut, and the tent stretches into place, white on white, polymer on snow, a bubble of sanctuary, and, suddenly, our shelter is ready. The thrill of success fills the air, and Bola enters and comes out again, smiling.

"We have shelter!"

Now dinner, Manuel sends.

Dinner is small bags of cold, chewy beef. Once we have the fire going, we can cook our food. For now, it's cold from the bag. *If we were really on our own in the mountains, we would hunt for our food,* I send. The image of me carrying the carcass of an elk over my shoulders makes Moira laugh. I mean it as a joke, but then I count the bags of jerky and dried fruit. We will be hungry by the end of the test. It is my job to see to the safety of the pod, and I feel bad that we did not pack more food.

"Another test," Bola says. "Another way to see if we're good enough. As if this mountain is anything like another world! As if this will tell them *anything* about us!"

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Sometimes we feel manipulated. I know what Bola means. Everything we face is another test to pass. There is no failure, just success, repeated, until it means nothing. When we fail, it will be catastrophic.

"We can watch the sunset," I say.

We have loosened hoods and gloves in the tent, though it is still just above freezing inside. But the difference between inside and out becomes even more severe as the sun now hides behind the western peaks. The sunset is colorless, the sunlight crisp and white. It reflects off the bottom of the Ring, making the slim orbital torus brighter than it is at noon. Wispy clouds slide across the sky, moving fast, and I note to the others the possibility of snow. Before our five days on the mountain are over, we will see more snow, that is certain. Perhaps tonight.

Elliott O'Toole has managed to light a fire, and we smell the burning wood. He has finished his tent, and he has a fire. The smell of roasted meat drifts on the wind.

"Bastard!" Quant said. "He has steak!"

We don't need it.

I want it!

I say, "This is only about surviving, not luxury."

Bola glares at me, and I sense his anger. He is not alone. I cave before this partial consensus and apologize, though I don't know why I do. Meda has told me that I hate strife. I assume that everyone does. We are six and I am one. I bow to the group consensus, as we all do. It is how we reach the best decision.

With dinner finished and night upon us, we finish what chores we can outside: a fire, if we can start it, and a latrine. Manuel and I work on the fire pit, moving stones, breaking tinder, building up a steeple of wood. The wind is too strong, I realize, for a fire tonight. The flatness of the plateau made it a good place for a tent, but the wind whips down the ravine. The tent ropes sing.

We smell fear on the wind, child pheromones, and I think one of us is in danger, but then we smell it as a foreign fear: one of our classmates is in danger. Then, as the wind dies for a moment, we hear the heavy breathing of someone running through the snow drifts. The pod condenses around me, as it does in times of crisis. We touch, assess, but we have only the smell and the sound to base consensus on.

I move forward to help whoever it is. I smell the caution in the air, but ignore it. Now is the time to help. Sometimes we spend too much time being cautious, consensing on things. I would never share such thoughts.

It is one of Hagar Julian, just one. I don't know her name, but she is running in the cold, her hood down, her head exposed. She doesn't see me, but I catch her in my arms and stop her. In her terror, she would have run past us into the dark night, perhaps over the cliff.

The smell of her is alien. I force the hood over her head. The head is a heat sink; you must always keep it covered in the cold. That and the hands. Perhaps this is why the instructors have chosen the mountains for our final test; the organs that make us a pod are nearly useless in the cold.

"What is it? What's happened?" I ask.

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She is heaving, releasing fear and nothing else. I don't know how much of her fear is from being separated from her self or from something else that has happened. I know that Julian is a close-knit pod. They seldom separate.

The night is black. I can't see O'Toole's fire, nor Julian's ice cave anymore. It is a miracle that she reached us.

I pick her up over my shoulder and carry her slowly through the snowdrifts to the open area around our tent. She is shivering. I push through the questions of my pod. Now is not the time for questions. Quant pulls open the tent for me.

Snow falls out of the woman's gloves. I take them off her hands, which are blue, and exchange them for my own. I check her boots and coat for more snow, and brush it out. By then, the rest of my pod has joined me, and I use them to access our survival instruction.

Hypothermia.

The shivering, the disorientation, and the lack of response are all signs of body-temperature loss. Maybe some of the disorientation is from being separated from her pod.

Hospitalize.

One of us glances at the transceiver in the corner of the tent. It is defeat to use it.

"Where's the rest of you?" I ask.

She doesn't even look at me.

I take a coil of spider-silk rope and begin cinching it to my coat.

No.

"Someone has to see what happened to the rest of her," I say.

We can't separate now.

I feel the pull to stay and consense. To wait for rescue.

"Keep her warm. Huddle close to her. Don't warm her quickly."

I pull the tent door open and close it, but not before Quant follows me out.

"Be careful. It's beginning to snow," she says. She takes the rope end from me and ties it to one of the D-rings on our tent. The end wraps around itself and knits itself together.

"I will."

The wind whips the snow into my face, needles of cold. I hunch over and try to make out Julian's tracks from her camp to ours. Snow has already started to fill in the prints. The moon glooms through scudding grey clouds, making the mountainside grey on grey. I continue, making this task my focus, so that I do not remember that I have left my pod behind. Even so, I count the steps I take, marking the distance of our separation.

I have to keep my face up to follow the tracks, and when I do, the wind freezes my nasal passages. The cold is like a headache. There is no smell on the wind, no trace of Hagar Julian.

The woman has walked across a slide of broken slate. Her footprints end on the jagged mounds of rock. I pause, knowing I am close to their campsite; they had been no farther than three hundred meters when I'd spied them.

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I turn my back to the wind and tuck my head a moment. Still the snow finds a way into my eyes. The weather is worsening. I take a moment to memorize the feeling, the sting, the sound—for later.

I trudge on across the slate, slipping once and falling to one knee. The slate ends in a river of grey snow. I don't remember seeing this before. Then I realize that it's new. The snow bank above has collapsed, burying Hagar Julian's campsite in an avalanche.

I stand there, ignoring the cold.

I take one step onto the snow and it crunches under my boots. An hour ago, this area was clear, and now it is under a flood of rocks and snow. I look up at the mountain, wondering if more will follow, but swirling snow obscures it.

I climb up the side of the hill of snow. Ten meters into the slide, I see a flap of cloth, half covered. I pull at it, but the rest is buried too deep for me to extract it.

"Julian!" Sifting flakes muffle my voice. I yell again for my classmate.

I hear no reply, though I doubt I would have heard anything at all unless the speaker was next to me.

I pull my hands out of my pockets, hoping to catch a whiff of something on the pads on my palm. Nothing but needling cold. I am cocooned in a frozen, white mask. As isolated as the one part of Julian who made it to our camp.

I turn back. We will need digging equipment and many people to find Julian's corpses. I do not see how they could have survived. Except for the one.

But then I see something black against the grey of the swept snow. Just a smudge that catches my eye as I turn.

I stop and take one step up the slope, and I see that it is an arm. I am clawing at the ice, snow, and rock, hoping, praying that below is a breathing body.

I scoop huge armfuls of snow behind me and down the slope, tracing the arm down, reaching a torso, and finding a hooded head. I try to pull the body out, but the legs are still trapped. I pause, and slowly pull back the hood. Male, a part of Julian, face and cheeks splotchy pink, eyes shut. The snow swirls around his mouth, and I think that it means he's breathing, but I can't be sure. I pass my palm under his nose, tasting for any pheromone, but there is nothing. I feel for a pulse.

Nothing.

My mind struggles to remember how to revive a victim with a stopped heart. Moira would know. Quant would know. They all would know. Alone, I know nothing.

I panic and just grab the body about its torso and heave backward, trying to free it from the snow. I pull but the body remains embedded. I sweep at the man's hips, feeling the futility of it. I'm useless here. Strength is useless now. I don't know what to do.

But now he is free to his knees, and I pull again. He comes free in a cascade of snow. I stagger under his weight, then lay him down.

I kneel next to him, trying to remember. My hands are red and stinging, and I stuff them into my pockets, angry at myself. I am useless alone. Moira would . . . then it comes to me, as if Moira had sent it to me in a ball

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of memory. Compressions and breathing. Clear the throat, five compressions and a breath, five and a breath. Repeat.

I push at the man's coat, unsure if I am doing anything through the bundles of clothing. Then I squeeze his nose and breathe into his mouth. It's cold, like a dead worm, and my stomach turns. Still I breathe into his mouth and then compress again, counting slowly.

The cycle repeats, and his chest rises when I breathe into him. I stop after a minute to check the pulse. I think I feel something, and I wonder if I should stop. Is that his own diaphragm moving or just the air I've forced into him leaving his lungs, like a bellows?

I can't stop, and bend to the task again.

A cough, a spasm, but a reaction, and then he is breathing.

Alive!

The pulse is fast and reedy, but there.

Can he move? Can I get him back to the tent to warm him?

Then I hear the whine of the air car, and realize I won't have to carry him. Help is on the way. I fall back into the snow. Alive!

The whine of the car rises, and I see its lights coming up the valley, louder, too loud. I wonder at the fragility of the layers of snow on the ridges above and if the shrill engines will cause another wave of snow.

I can do nothing but wait. The air car reaches the edge of our camp and lowers itself behind the trees.

The engines die, but the sound does not. There is a deep rumble all around me, and I know what is happening. I know that the snow is coming down the mountain again. The first avalanche has weakened the ledge of snow.

I stand, unsure. Then I see the wave of white in the air car spotlights.

"No!" I take one step toward the camp, then stop. The Julian here will die if I leave him.

The snow slams into my pod's campsite, flies up where it strikes the trees surrounding the tent. I see the twirling lights of the air car thrown up into the air. My pod! My body tenses, my heart thudding. I take one step forward.

The rumble is a crashing roar now. I look up at the snowbank above me, fearing that ice is about to bury us. But the outcropping of snow that has fed the first avalanche has uncovered a jagged ledge that is shielding us. The river of snow flows twenty meters away, but comes no nearer. If it had taken me, I would not have cared. My pod is in the torrent, and my neck tightens so that I can barely breathe.

I see something snaking on the ground, and think that the snow is chasing me uphill. I am jerked off my feet.

Dragged across the rock and ice, I realize that it is the line attached to my waist. The other end is attached to our tent, and it is dragging me down the mountain. Five, ten, twenty meters, I struggle to untie the rope, to find the nodule that will untwine the knot, but my chafed, useless hands can grip nothing.

I fall on my face, feel something smash into my nose, and in a daze I slide another few meters, closer to the avalanche. I thought it was slowing, but this close, it still seems to be a cascade of flying rock and snow.

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I stand, fall, then stand again and lunge toward the avalanche, hoping to slacken the rope. I run, and I see a tree, at the edge of the river. I dive at it, haul myself around it once, then once more, wedging the line.

I pull and brace, and then the line is steel-taut.

My legs are against the trunk and I am standing against it, holding on, or else I'll be sucked into the vortex with my pod.

For a moment, the desperation whispers the question: how bad would that be? Is it better to die with my pod, or live on alone, a singleton, useless? A moment before, I had been ready for the avalanche to take me too.

But I cannot let go. A part of Julian still needs my help. I hold on, listening for the rumble to lessen.

Seconds, and then a minute, then two. Still I hold on, and the storm of snow slows, and the pull on my arms decreases. Sweat rolls down my cheeks, though the air is frigid. My arms shake. When the rope finally falls limp, I slump down and lie below the tree, unable to move. I am spent, and it takes minutes for me to recover enough to remove the rope. My fingers are raw and weak, and the spider-silk will not separate. Finally, the end unknits.

I stand and fall.

I shove my face into the snow to cool it, then realize how foolish that is. I stand again, and this time I make several steps before my legs shudder out from beneath me.

The snow is as soft as a feather bed, and I resolve to rest just a few moments.

It would be easy to sleep. So easy.

But I don't. The man is still on the mountain. A singleton just like me. He needs me. He needs someone strong to carry him down the mountain.

I glance at the rope. At the other end is my pod. How could they have survived the torrent? I stand and take one step onto the debris, but a cascade of tumbling snow drives me back. The snow ridge above is still unstable. I wipe my eyes with my raw hands, then turn and follow the trail I made as I was dragged down the mountain. It is easy to see the trail of blood I have left. I touch my lip and nose; I hadn't realized I'd been bleeding.

The Julian is still there, still breathing. And I cry aloud to see him alive, bawling like a child. I am anything but strength.

"What . . . what are you . . . crying for?"

The Julian is looking up at me, his teeth chattering.

"I'm crying because we're alive," I say.

"Good." His head drops back into the snow. His lips are blue and I know the chattering is a response to the cold and a precursor to hypothermia. We need to get him medical attention. We . . .

I am thinking as if I am still a pod. I cannot rely on Manuel to help me lift him. I cannot rely on Bola to show me the quickest way down. I am alone.

"We need to go."

"No."

"You need to get to warmth and medical aid."

"My pod."

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I shrug, unsure how to tell him. "They're buried under here."

"I smell them. I hear them."

I sniff. Maybe there's a trace of thought on the wind, but I can't be sure.

"Where?" I ask.

"Nearby. Help me up."

I pull him to his feet and he leans against me, groaning. We take a step; he points.

I see the flap of cloth buried in the snow that I had noticed before.

He had survived several minutes in the snow. Perhaps his pod is trapped below. Perhaps they are in an air pocket, or in their hollowed out snow cave.

I kneel and begin to scoop away the snow around the cloth flap. He rolls next to me and tries to help clear. But he slumps against a mound of snow, too weak, and watches me instead.

The cloth is a corner of a blanket and it seems to go straight down.

For a while the going is all ice, and I claw at it with my numb fingers, unable to move more than a handful at a time. Then I am through that and the digging is easier.

Clods of snow bounce off my hood, and I am leery of more snow falling on top of us. I take a moment to push away all the snow from around us.

Two more scoops and suddenly the snow gives way, and I see a cavern of ice and snow and canvas, and within the cave, three bodies, three more of Julian. They are alive, breathing, and one is conscious. I pull them one by one out of the cave and put them next to their podmate.

The two that are conscious cling to each other and lie there, gasping for breath, and I am so tired I want to collapse into the hole.

I check each one for hypothermia, for breaks and contusions. One of them, a female, has a broken arm, and she winces as I move her. I have a loop of rope on my belt, not spider-silk, and I bind her arm across her chest. The fourth is unhurt.

"Wake up," I say. "Come on." The fourth one opens his eyes, begins to cough. The third, with the broken arm, is still unconscious. I gently slap her face. She comes awake and lunges, then gasps as the pain hits her. Her pod, what is left of it, surrounds her, and I step back, fall back on the snow, looking up into the sky. I realize that the snow is coming down harder.

"We have to get down the mountain," I say. If another air car comes, it will start another avalanche. If another avalanche comes, we are doomed.

They don't seem to hear me. They cling together, their teeth chattering.

"We have to get down the mountain!" I yell.

Despair floods the air, then a stench of incoherent emotions. The four are in shock.

"Come on!" I say and pull one of them up.

"We can't . . . our . . . podmates," he says, words interspersed with chemical thoughts that I don't understand. The pod is degenerating.

"If we don't go now, we will die on this mountain. We have no shelter, and we are freezing."

They don't reply, and I realize they would rather die than break their pod.

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"There's four of you," I say. "You are nearly whole."

They look among themselves, and I smell the consensus odor. Then one of them turns away angrily. They can't do it. No consensus.

I collapse onto the snow, head down, and watch the snow swirl between my legs. I am one who was six. The fatigue and despair catch me, and my eyes burn.

I am strength; I do not cry. But still my face is washed with tears for my pod, buried in the snow. My face is fire where the tears crawl. A splash falls into the snow and disappears.

We will sleep here in despair and die before the morning.

I look at them. I must get them down the mountain, but I don't know how to do it. I wonder what thoughts Moira would pass me if she were here. She would know what to do with these four.

They are four. Mother Redd was a four. Our teachers are fours. The Premier of the Overgovernment is a four. Why do they cry when they are no worse off than our greatest? I am allowed to cry, but not them.

I stand up.

"I've lost my pod too, and I am only one!" I shout. "*I* can cry, but *you* can't! You are four. Get up! Get up, all of you!"

They look at me as if I am mad, so I kick one, and she grunts.

"Get up!"

Slowly they rise, and I grin at them like a maniac.

"We will reach the bottom. Follow me. I am strength."

I lead them across the snow to the spill of the other avalanche. With the nanoblade on my utility knife, I cut a length of the rope that disappears into the snow. At the other end of the rope is my dead pod. I take a step onto the grey avalanche; perhaps I can dig them out as I have dug out Hagar Julian. I hear a rumble as the snow shifts beneath me. More snow tumbles down the mountain. It has not settled yet; more snow could fall at any moment. And I know that it has been too long now. If they are trapped under the snow, their air is gone. If I had turned at once, if I had followed the rope when the avalanche had stopped, perhaps I could have saved them, but I didn't think of that. Quant wasn't there to remind me of the logical choice. Bitterness seeps through me, but I ignore it. There are the four who are left to take care of.

I hand each of them a section of the rope, looping us together. Then I lead them down the mountain. It is nearly black, save the light reflected by the moon that splashes upon the snow. The ledge and gaping holes are obvious. It is the hidden crevasses that I fear. But every step we take is better than lying asleep in the snow.

Our path leads to a drop, and I back us up quickly, not wanting the four to gaze into the abyss. I begin to wonder if there is no way down. We were dropped off by air cars that morning. Perhaps the location is so remote that air cars alone can reach it. Perhaps there is no path down the mountain. Or worse, we will pass through the path of an avalanche and die under the piles of snow.

The snowfall is steady now, and in places we are up to our hips. But the effort is warmth. To move is to live, to stop is sleep and death.

The trees all look alike, and I fear we are stumbling in circles, but I

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know that if we continue downward we will reach the bottom. I see no signs of animal or human. The snow is pristine until we tramp through it.

The line jerks, and I turn to see that the last in the line, the one with the broken arm, has fallen.

I go to her and lift her onto my shoulder. The weight is nothing to the ache I already feel. What is another sixty kilograms? But our pace is slower now.

Still the others lag, and I allow rests, but never enough to let them sleep, until the fatigue is too much and I let my eyes droop.

Oblivion for just a moment, then I start awake. To sleep is to die. I rouse the four.

The four. I am thinking of them no longer as a pod, but as a number. Will they refer to me as the singleton? The one? There may be a place for a quad in society. But there is no place for a singleton.

After the Exodus of the Community, after the wars that followed, it was the pods who had remained in control. The pods are now the care takers of the Earth, while the normal humans who are left—the singletons—are backward and luddite. The pods, just a biological experiment, a minority before, are the ones who survived cataclysm. Only now I am no longer a pod; I am a singleton, and the only place for me is in the singleton enclaves. Alone I cannot function in pod society. What could I contribute? Nothing. I look at the four. There is one thing I can contribute. These four are still a pod, still an entity. I can bring them to safety.

I stand up. "Let's go," I say, but gently. They are too empty to protest. I show them how to put the snow to their lips and drink it as it melts.

"We need to go." The one with the broken arm tries to walk. I walk beside her with a hand on her good arm.

The pine forest gives way to denser deciduous trees, and I feel warmer, though the temperature cannot have risen much. But the trees think it's warmer, so I think so too. The snow is less heavy here. Perhaps the storm is letting up.

"This mountain," I say, "is less than seven kilometers high. We can walk seven kilometers easily, even in the cold. And this is all downhill."

No one laughs. No one replies.

The wind is gone, I notice, and with it the snow. The sky is grey still, but the storm is over. I begin to think that we might not die.

Then the last in our line steps too close to a ravine, and he's down the side, sliding from sight. The next two in line, unable or unwilling to let go, slide after him, and I watch the slithering rope.

Again, I think. Again with this damn rope pulling me away. I let go of it, and the rope disappears into the grey below. The woman at my side doesn't even know what is happening.

The ravine is three meters down, lined by a steep, but not vertical, slope. I see the three who have fallen at the base. I have no way to get them out, so I must follow.

I take the woman over my shoulder, and say, "Hold on." I slide down the hill, one arm to balance me, one arm to hold her, and my legs folded beneath me, lowering myself down the slope.

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No hidden tree branches, I hope. There are none, and sooner than I think, we are at the bottom of the ravine.

The three others are there, sprawled at the edge of a small, unfrozen stream. Sometime in the past, water has carved a cave-like trough into the ravine wall. The woman on my shoulder has passed out, her face grey, her breathing shallow. How bad is her fracture? I wonder. How much worse have I made it? Manuel would have known an elegant way to get her down.

The air is warm here, in this grotto that is nearly below the ground. It is like a cave; the ground is a constant temperature a few meters below the surface, regardless of the blazing heat or the blowing snow. I squat. It may be five degrees.

"We can rest here." We can even sleep, I think. No chance of frostbite. We can't get wet; the stream is too shallow.

A few meters down the streambed, I find an indentation. It is dry rock with roots overhanging. I carry the woman there and lead the others one by one to the cave.

"Sleep," I tell them.

My body is exhausted, and I watch the four fall asleep at once. I cannot. The female is in shock. I have made her arm worse by slinging her over my shoulder. She is probably bleeding internally.

I look at her grey face, and console myself that she would be dead if we were still a thousand meters up the mountain.

Unless they had sent another air car.

I sit there, my heart cold, not sleeping.

I have always been strong, even when we were children, before we first consensed. I was always taller, stronger, heavier. And that has always been my weapon. It is obvious. I am not about deception. I am not about memory, or insight, or agility. I am quick when threats are near, yes, but never agile.

I never thought I would outlive my pod. I never thought I'd be the one left.

I don't want to think these things, so I stand up, and use my utility knife to cut two saplings that are trying to grow in the gully. Using the rope, I fashion a travois. It will be easier on the female.

"You should have left us on the mountain." It is the one who I had first found in the snow. His eyes are open. "You're wasting too much energy on a broken pod."

I say nothing, though I could acknowledge the truth of it.

"But then you wouldn't know that. All your thinking parts are missing."

He's angry, and he is striking out at me because of it. I nod.

"Yes, I am strength and nothing more."

Maybe he wants to fight, I think, so I add, "I saved your life today."

"So? Should I thank you?"

"No. But you owe me your life. So we will walk down this mountain in the morning, and then we are even. You can die then, and I won't care."

"Pig-headed."

"Yes." I can't argue with that either.

He is asleep in moments, and I am too.

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* * *

I am stiff and cold in the morning, but we are all alive. I squat on the stones and listen for a few moments. The trickle of the water muffles all sound. I can't hear the whine of a rescue air car. I can't hear the shouts of searchers. We have traveled so far that they will not look for us in the right spot. We have no choice but to continue on.

A wave of doubt catches me unaware. My choice has doomed us. But more than likely staying on the mountain would have done the same, only sooner. These four want that, I know. Perhaps I should too.

I touch my pockets one by one. I am hungry, but I already know there is no food. I was just stepping out of the tent for a moment. I had not prepared myself for a long journey in the cold. I check the pockets of the injured one, but she too is without food.

"Do you have food?" I ask the male, the one who argued with me. "What's your name anyway?"

"Hagar Jul. . . ," he starts to say, then stops. He glares at me. "No food."

I squat next to him. "Perhaps I can lead you back up the mountain, and then you'll forgive me for saving you."

"'Saving' is a debatable term."

I nod. "What's your name?"

We have been classmates for ten years, and yet I do not know his individual name. We have always interfaced as pods, never as individuals.

He doesn't say anything for a long moment, then says, "David."

"And them?"

"Susan is the one with the broken arm. Ahmed and Maggie." These three are still asleep on the ground.

"The others may still be alive," I say, and as I say it, I know it is what I wish for myself. But I saw the river of snow that carried them away.

"We didn't find Alia and Wren," he says, and then he coughs. It is to hide the sob.

I turn away, not wanting to embarrass him, and I say, "One of them found our tent. She may still live."

"That was Wren. Alia was near me."

"A rescue party—"

"Did you see a rescue party?"

"No."

"A body will survive for an hour in the snow if there's air. If there's no air, then it is ten minutes." His voice is savage. The other three stir.

"It was like swimming in oil. Like swimming in a dream while smothering," David says.

"David."

It is Maggie. She pulls him close, and I smell the tang of consensus. They gather near Susan and sit for minutes, thinking. I am glad for them, but I walk down the stream several meters, not wanting to be reminded. I am a singleton now.

The creek twists and turns. I pull myself across a rotten pine tree blocking the way, banging loose a rain of brown needles. My breath hangs in the moist air. It is not cold anymore, and I feel as if a thaw has passed through me.

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The stream widens and opens up over a rocky basin where it spills in white spray. I see the valley before me, shrouded in mist. A kilometer below, the stream merges with a river. The ground to the river is rough and rocky, but not as snowy as we have traveled until now. Nor is it as steep.

We'd left for the survival trip from a base camp near a river. I can only suppose that this is the same river. Following it would lead us to the camp.

I hurry back to the four.

They stand apart, their consensus concluded. David hoists Susan's travois.

"Are you ready?" I ask.

They look at me, their faces relaxed. This is the first time these four have consensed since their pod was sundered. It is a good sign that they can do it with just four.

"We're going back to find Alia and Wren," David says.

I stand for a moment, voiceless. They have reached a false consensus. It is something that we are trained to detect and discard. But the trauma and loss they have suffered has broken their thought processes.

David takes my silence for agreement, and he pulls Susan up the streambed.

I stand, unable to resist a valid consensus, unable to stop them from climbing back up the mountain. I take one step toward them, perhaps to fall in line with them, but I stop.

"No!" I say. "You'll never make it."

The four of them look at me as if I am a rock. It's not false consensus; it's pod instability. Insanity.

"We need to re-form the whole," David says.

"Wait! You've reached false consensus!"

"How could you know? You can't consense at all." The biting words jolt me.

They start walking. I run to intercept, placing a hand on David's chest.

"You will die if you go back up the mountain. You can't make it."

Ahmed pushes my arm away.

"We have to get back to Alia and Wren."

"Who was your ethicist?" I say. "Was it Wren? Is that why you're making faulty consensus? Think! You will die, just like Wren and Alia are dead."

"We had no ethical specialist," Maggie says.

"I saw the river from the end of this gully. We're almost to the camp! If we turn around, we will never find our way. We will be on the mountain at night. We have no food. We have no shelter. We will die."

No response but a step forward.

I push David hard, and he stumbles. Susan screams as the travois slams onto the rocks.

"You have reached a faulty consensus," I say again.

Pheromones flood the air, and I realize much of it is mine: veto, a simple pheromone signal we all know but rarely use. David swings at me, but I stop his fist. He is not strength.

"We go down," I say.

David's face is taut. He spins and the four fall into consensus.

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I push David away from his podmates, breaking their contact. I push Ahmed and Maggie onto their backs.

"No consensus! We go now!"

I pick up Susan's travois and drag her down the streambed. Fast. I look back once and the three are standing there, watching. Then they come.

Maybe I am reaching false consensus too. Maybe I will kill us all. But it is all I can do.

The trek down the gorge is not easy on Susan, as the snow has disappeared in spots and the travois rides roughly across the ground. I find myself issuing soothing thoughts, though I know she cannot understand them. Only crude emotions can pass between pods, and sometimes not even that if they aren't from the same crèche. I change the thoughts to feelings of well-being. Perhaps she can understand the simple pheromones.

Each time I glance behind, I see the other three trailing. I have broken their re-formed pod again with trauma, and I hope that I have done no irreparable damage to them. The doctors of the Institute will be the judge of that. Perhaps they can save them. I am a useless case and will probably have to emigrate to one of the singleton enclaves in Europe or Australia.

A line of boulders face me, surrounded by smaller stones and rocks, too large for the travois to travel freely across.

"Take one end each," I say to Ahmed and David. The travois becomes a stretcher. If I walk slowly, we make awkward progress.

The forest has changed. The pines are gone, and we are surrounded by maples. I keep checking the horizon for any sign of search parties. Why aren't they frantically trying to find us? Had we passed too far beyond the search pattern? Do they already know where we are? Perhaps they found us in the night, noted that we were broken pods, and left us to fend for ourselves.

The paranoia drowns me, and I stumble on a loose rock. Even they would not be so callous. Everything is a test, Moira says. Is this just another? Would they kill a pod to test the rest of us?

That I cannot believe.

At the edge of a four-meter drop, our stream falls into the river, adding its small momentum to the charging rapids. I see no easy way down; we are forced to unlash Susan and help her down the jagged slope.

The rocks are wet and slimy. I slip, and we are flying to the ground, falling less than a meter, but the wind is knocked from me. Susan lands atop me, and she screams in pain.

I roll over and try to breathe. Then Ahmed and David are there, helping us up. I don't want to stand up. I just want to lie there.

"Up," David says. "More to go."

Everything is hazy in my vision, and I feel dizzy. The pain in my chest is not going away. I have a sharp sting in my ribs, and I prod myself. I have broken ribs. I almost collapse, but Ahmed pulls me up.

Susan manages to stand too now, and we limp along the flat stones of the shrunken riverbed. In a few months, the river will fill the entire wash.

We are an ad-hoc pod, all of us clinging together as we walk, step after step downriver. I am no longer strength. I am weakness and pain.

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We pass a boulder and the smell hits me as we see it.

A bear, almost as big as the boulder. No, three bears pawing through the slow water for fish. We are not five meters from the biggest and closest.

Fear sweeps through the air; my fight response kicks in, and the pain washes out of me like cold rain.

We have surprised the bears.

The closest rears up on its hind legs. On all fours, it came up to my chest. Standing, it is a meter above me. Its claws are six centimeters long.

We back away. I know we cannot outrun a bear in this open terrain. Our only hope is to flee alone.

Separate, I send, then remember that the four are not of my pod. "We need to separate and run," I say.

The bear stops coming toward us. I think for a moment that it is reacting to my voice, but then I remember the smell I had caught as I passed the boulder. Pheromones.

The bears aren't a natural species.

Hello, I send, in the simplest of glyph thoughts.

The bear's jaws snap shut and it lands on its four legs again.

Not food, it sends.

The thought is more than simple. I can taste it like my own podmates' thoughts.

Not food. Friend.

The bear considers us with liquid brown eyes, then seems to shrug before turning away.

Come.

I start to follow, but fear emanating from the four stops me. I realize that they have not tasted the bear's thoughts.

"Come on," I say. "They aren't going to eat us."

"You . . . you can understand it?" David asks.

"A little."

"They're a pod," he says, wonderingly.

My shock has faded with recognition. On the farm with Mother Redd, we have gone swimming with the bioengineered beavers. We have ourselves modified clutches of ducks into clusters. Now that I know, I can see the glands on the backs of the bears' arms. At the neck are slits that release the chemical memories. And to receive them, the olfactory lobe of their brain will have been enhanced.

That they are bears, that they are wild things, seems at first incongruent. The experiments on composite animals have been all on smaller, manageable beasts. But why not bears?

They amble along the riverbed, and I jog to follow them, though my ribs hurt. In a moment, I am among them, and I smell their thoughts, like silver fish in the river. Intelligent, not simple at all.

Sending *Friendship,* I reach out and touch the side of the bear who confronted us.

His fur is wet from his splashing at fish, and the smell is thick, not just pheromones and memories, but a wild animal's smell. I think I must smell worse. His mane is silver-tipped; his claws click on the stones.

I rub his neck just above the memory glands, and he pushes against me

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in response. I smell his affection. I sense deepness of thought and playfulness. I feel the power of his body. This is strength.

I catch images of topography, of places where fish swarm, of a dead elk. I see assessments of danger, and choices of path and best approach. I catch the consensus of decision. These three are a functioning pod.

The thoughts swirl through my head, but they shouldn't. I should not be able to catch their thoughts, but I can. Even humans can't share chemical memories between pods, just emotions sometimes.

I send an image of the avalanche.

The bears shudder. I understand their fear of the river of snow. They have seen it; it is part of their memories.

I ask them where the camp is. They know, and I see it on the edge of this river, near the rotten stump with the tasty termites.

I laugh, and they echo my joy, and, for a moment, I forget that I am alone.

Come on, they send.

"Come on," I call back to the four. Hesitantly, they follow.

The bears lead us through the trees, and, abruptly, we push through onto a trail, smashed flat by hikers' boots, a *human* trail. They sniff once, then amble across it and vanish into the brush.

I want to follow. Why shouldn't I? I have fulfilled my duty to Hagar Julian. Surely the bears would allow me to join them. My body shudders. I would still be a singleton. I would still be alone.

Goodbye, I send, though I doubt they are close enough to catch it. The chemical memories cannot travel far.

I lead Susan down the trail, supporting her. I hear the sounds of camp, the voices, the whine of an air car, before we round the last curve of the trail. We all stop. David looks at me, perhaps with pity, perhaps with thanks, then he leads the remainder of his pod into the camp.

I stand alone.

I fall to my knees, so tired, so weak. My strength can get me no farther.

Then I feel a push at my back, and it is the bear. He nudges me again. One arm around his steel-like neck, I stand, and we walk together into the camp.

The camp is awhirl, twice as many tents as when we left it, a bevy of air cars, and everyone stops to watch me and the bear.

Everyone but my pod, who are rushing at me, alive, and I feel them before I touch them, and we are one. Sweet consensus.

I see everything that has happened, and they see everything that I have done, and in one moment it is I who surfed the avalanche, dangling on the line Strom tied to a tree trunk, and it is we who walked down the mountain and communed with bears.

You saved us, Strom, Moira sends. Bola shows me how the tent dangling on my line of spider-silk, rode the top of the cascade of snow instead of plunging down the mountain. I hug Meda, Quant, and Manuel to my chest, squeezing. It hurts my ribs, but I don't let go.

"Careful!" Meda says, but she buries her face in my chest.

I am strength again, I think, as my pod helps me to the infirmary, not because they are weak, but because we are all strong. O

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THE STAR CALLED WORMWOOD

Elizabeth Counihan

Elizabeth Counihan is from a writing family. Her father was a BBC journalist and her grandfather was a novelist. Before concentrating on writing, Ms. Counihan was a family doctor for many years. Her stories have appeared in *Realms of Fantasy, Interzone,* and several other magazines and anthologies. She edits the British fantasy magazine *Scheherazade.* "The Star Called Wormwood" is her first story for *Asimov's.*

In the week that Anya died, a comet approached the Earth. At first a bright spark in the east, it enlarged, trailing a cloud of shimmering white—a glowing snowball, flung into the sky above the frozen landscape of Siberia. Anya did not see it. She lay, ninety-nine years old, in the last ice palace, tended by machines older than she was. Their antennae perceived the new celestial body. Their voices reported it, echoing through vaulted chambers and long-abandoned halls where, here and there, a small creature twitched a whisker or pricked a furry ear before returning to the business of living. The voices whispered in Anna's room. She could no longer speak, but electronic eyes interpreted the movement of her lips, and recorded that her last word was "Wormwood." Her breath rattled in a last sigh and her eyes closed.

The machines went to the burial place and drew out a core of ice. Anya's body was wrapped in an embroidered sheet and placed feet-first in the bore hole. Finally, as they had been taught, the machines reverently capped her grave with powdered ice and played the music appropriate to the death of a lady of the palace. The sound was heard only by the wolves and bears of the wilderness.

Her grave, the last in row upon row of similar graves, lay under the bleak gaze of the comet.

The comet hurtled on, over wrinkled mountains, arid plains, sun-

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drenched ocean. Wild dogs howled at its passing; owls blinked under its bright gaze.

Kuri squatted beside a thorn tree, his shadow black and dwarfish under the equatorial sun. He reached out a dark, bony hand and picked up a fragment of yellow ringlass from the jigsaw of colored shards at his feet, laying it carefully to one side with pieces he had already chosen. After a few moments' thought, chin in cupped hand, he selected a second piece, green this time, and laid it with the others. He removed his wide-brimmed hat and half-filled it with the selected glass, then, rising stiffly, walked toward his house beside the lake. His body was wiry and naked, his knobbly feet bare; without his hat, only a tangle of grey and black hair protected his head from the sun.

His way to the domed building lay across a hundred meters of flat desert, fringed at its margin by dark reeds. From there, the jade-green lake stretched into the west. A feather of white vapor spiraled from the volcano on Crocodile Island and dispersed in the shimmering air. Kuri stopped halfway to catch his breath, his throat rasped by the harsh taint of the volcano. He gazed with narrowed eyes, half-blinded by the beauty of his ancient home, placed like a jewel of many colors between him and the lake. At this time of day, the windows were almost inaudible, a subdued harmony, but, to the sight, they blazed with the brilliance of the noonday sun.

There was a flicker of movement near the water. Kuri shaded his eyes with his free hand, then grinned and whistled loudly through his fingers. The moving shape bounded toward him on all fours, but rose onto hind legs when it reached his side. The creature, yellow-brown like the earth, planted a slender forepaw on each side of his chest. Green eyes, adoring as a dog's, gazed up at him from a flat, cat-like face. Her tongue rasped his skin.

He bent and kissed her between the ears, then said, "Drink, Jade."

"Drink? Water? Juice drink?" she answered in her breathy growl. She rubbed her head against his hand and he stroked her under the chin.

"Juice. In the house," he said. She raced back toward the glowing building, her tail waving like a yellow plume. Kuri followed more slowly, still clutching his hat. The glass vibrated gently, picking up the resonance of the house. His feet left one more line of prints in the dusty earth. He looked back; today's line went only to the thorn tree, and the previous day's reached no further, yet he was very tired. He squinted to see older tracks. There were Jade's paw marks skittering here, there, and everywhere, and the bigger marks of her cousins, the wild adapts. He saw the slots of jumbuck, and, with a stir of anxiety, the recent pugmarks of a fanged leopard. Plodding into the distance and only faintly discernible were the wide prints of his own dromedary. Was it then so long since he had ridden it inland? He realized with some surprise that it was two months at least. He turned slowly, looking in vain for signs of his own tracks extending further than the thorn tree and the pile of ringlass sparkling in the sun. He looked at his hand, black and wrinkled; at his arm, thin and sere as a dead thorn-branch. A shade fell across his soul.

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Kuri shrugged and trudged on. He was thirsty and there was work to do on the east window. The dark entrance to his home was cool and inviting below the blazing windows. He ducked to avoid the curved roof of the tunnel and plunged below ground like a fox to earth. Breathing heavily again, he sat down in the cool light of the northern window that glowed high above him. Jade skipped up to him on her hind legs, holding a beaker between her front paws. He drank, and his skin rained cold drops of sweat. He turned to Jade, but she had anticipated his next wish, and was proffering a square of damp lake-weed. He smiled at the little creature; in the window light, her tawny coat dappled purple and bronze like a child's toy. She pirouetted on two legs as if she knew he found her antics comical.

"Good Jade," he said, wiping his forehead. "You must go out this evening. Play with your friends."

"Kuri play with Jade?" she said.

"I'm too old to play. Old creatures don't play." She dropped to all fours and rubbed against his knee. Using her mouth, she took the weed from his hand, growling playfully, shaking her head about; then, seeing that he wasn't going to join the game, trotted out of the house to return it to the water.

Kuri sighed and stretched his creaking bones. He wanted to sleep, but wanted even more to return to his task. He lurched to his feet and fetched another juice drink from the cold store. He went over to the east side of his dwelling, and, with a critical eye, gazed up at the sun-shaped east window, brilliant in orange and yellow and yet transmitting no heat to him. He could not remember who had installed the window—his mother? Perhaps even his grandfather. He frowned, trying to recall that distant time when three people had lived here—no, four: there had been his brother, Omu, who had died from a snakebite.

He bent stiffly and picked up his krar, twanging its three strings in turn. A high keening resonated from the window above him. He shook his head in distaste, then played a series of chords. The keening descended in pitch, but was still unpleasing to his ear. This must have been the original artist's idea of the rising sun—too harsh, too strident for him.

He emptied his hat of the glass pieces and piled them onto a basketful he had selected on previous days. Then he ambled round the chamber, picking up tools here and there, taking them and the glass over to the east side. Finally, he made a wooden platform emerge creakily from the wall and swing toward him, lowering itself to floor level. He piled everything onto it and clambered up, directing the platform until it had risen on a swiveling arm to the roof. Even so close to the blazing sun of the window, he was neither dazzled nor overheated, such was the wonder of ringlass.

Once Kuri had decided the effect he wanted, he worked quickly, tapping out crescents of citrine and gamboge from the solar orb. As he removed the pieces, the true heat of the day blasted through the lattice like a wind from the volcano. He mopped his forehead with the brim of his hat, then jammed it on his head. The lattice itself writhed in discomfort and gratefully hugged the replacement sections, softer shades of rose and ochre,

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that he offered it. As each new piece was inserted, he tuned it with his krar, slicing tiny slivers of glass from the sections he was altering until both sight and sound merged with the image in his head.

By the time he lowered the mechanism to the ground, the sun was sinking toward the western window, which already vibrated gently in anticipation. Kuri slumped to the floor, too exhausted even to fetch himself another drink. He looked around for Jade, but she was not sleeping in her usual place, under the cool light of the north-west spiral, the only silent window. In his mind's eye, he saw her, among the reeds, skipping and pouncing with her adapt cousins. That would be only right.

He licked dry lips. She must prepare for a future without him—quite soon, he thought. But then he heard her familiar call, the repeated little noise she made when she was bringing him food. She bounded in through the entrance tunnel, a wriggling fish held in her jaws. She dropped it at his feet, and ran outside again, mewing joyfully. Kuri smiled, shaking his head. "I'm not hungry," he whispered to himself.

Jade returned with another fish, and skipped around while he persuaded his body to stand upright. He killed both fish with practiced efficiency, then put them in a net.

"Let's eat outside," Kuri said, knowing that would please her. He collected a knife and his cooking gear and went through the tunnel.

There was an evening wind blowing in from the lake, bringing the soda tang of its water and the sulfur of the volcano. The smell increased his thirst.

"Drink, Jade," he croaked, "water this time." He cleaned the fish and lit the stove while she fetched a pouch of fresh water from the purifier. Dropping the pouch in front of Kuri she ran, snarling, at a couple of vultures that were eyeing the fish. They flapped off, one remaining at a distance, shrouded on the dusky sand, the other swooping in low watchful circles. Kuri drank deeply, then tossed the fish into a pan, where they sizzled. The entrails he threw to Jade, who worried at them enthusiastically.

The music of the west window rose to a crescendo. Kuri turned toward the lake. All the brilliance of the windows on the eastern side had been quenched by approaching night, and, from his point of view, the building was in shadow, silhouetted against the western sky. The west window itself was hidden by the dark beehive of his home. Behind it, the waters of the lake changed from jade to molten crimson as they received the sun. Lapped in harmony, he grinned for sheer joy. The sound of the west window was perfect; but when he thought of the east—something still lacked. He frowned and turned back to his cooking. "I'm not hungry," he repeated under his breath.

As if they had heard him, a flock of tiny birds flew in from the lake, shrilling above the sonorous tones of the window. Most darted straight for their roosts in the thorn bushes and palm trees along the shore, but a canny few landed on the ground beside Kuri and bounced up and down, waiting for scraps. Kuri tore off a chunk of fish, put a morsel in his mouth and scattered the remainder well clear of Jade. She was crouched beside him, grooming herself. Now her ears pricked and she stretched, unsheathing her claws.

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"Leave them, Jade," Kuri said. "Fish is much nicer." He gave her a piece, and she tossed it into the air to cool it, catching it deftly, then eating it with little growls of pleasure. Kuri swilled the last of his mouthful with the aid of another drink of water. The music trailed away. He turned back once more. The water was now darkest indigo, the only other color a dusky ember-red gleaming fitfully from the volcano. The birds retreated and were silent. He heard the lapping of the water, the soughing of the wind, Jade's sleepy purring. He smiled down at her, the thing he loved best. Everything was as it should be, as it always had been, throughout his long life. Death would come, when it came.

He looked eastward, where the stars were already brilliant.

Something was different, an unfamiliar celestial body, faint, haloed in white.

Were his eyes failing at last? No—everything else was as sharp and bright as usual, the stars, the planets, the orbiters that his ancestors had sent into space thousands of years in the past. But now there was a new thing in the heavens.

Nearby, he heard the cough of a fanged leopard. He whistled for Jade and the two retreated indoors.

After three nights, Kuri realized that the new star was a comet. Each night, it was bigger, at first a hazy patch of bright light, then round like a tiny sun, surrounded by a white corona. On the third night, he saw the tail, spreading out, spangled by the stars, then lost among them. He had little knowledge of such things, whether this one had been predicted by astronomers or was a new visitor to the sky. Was it hurtling toward the Earth on a path of destruction or would it pass him by? Were there any wise men left alive to solve this riddle? Or was he the last human star-gazer to see and wonder?

The next morning, he donned loose trousers and went to saddle up his reluctant dromedary. She had been free for so many weeks that, apart from coming to him for tidbits, she had decided to ignore him. She had also elected to forget her name, "Beast," short for "The Beast Who Spits," because that was what she did best. Each time Kuri approached her, she lumbered off to a safe distance, then stopped and stared superciliously. Jade was no use in this situation. When she perceived Kuri's difficulty, she tried to help, but the dromedary spat with supreme accuracy, and, when the adapt approached snarling, lashed out dangerously.

In the end, guile and persistence won, but not before the cool of the morning had been burned away. By then, Kuri was gasping painfully, and his sweat-soaked trousers clung to his legs. Determination burned through his pounding headache. The work could not wait. Grumbling, the dromedary knelt and he climbed up. Jade yowled piteously but he told her he would be back for supper; she was to catch some fish and watch out for crocodiles.

Once started, Beast trundled down the familiar road and Kuri rested, even slept a little, huddled under a blanket and with his hat jammed on his head. When he opened his eyes again the lake had disappeared behind the hills. The air shimmered. Even the sound of the dromedary's footsteps was stifled. Her rancid smell enveloped him like a filthy cloak.

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He flapped his hat at the flies hustled around his eyes. He reached for a water pouch, draining it in a few gulps. They passed a troop of baboons, lolling in the shade of a rock, too idle to pester him for food. The only living things in the sun were two basking mambas, coiled like black ropes.

They reached the city by early afternoon, descending from the barren hills to a sudden oasis, a ring of green foliage and colored blossoms, its walls. To Kuri, it was simply "The City," the only one he had ever seen, although he knew that it was one of many, and that once it had had a name. The gateway was in the form of a rearing elephant, one foot raised. But there was no malice in the gate. It recognized the visitor and trumpeted a fanfare of welcome. He and the dromedary passed easily beneath the archway of its legs. Kuri did not so much as glance at the massive stone foot poised above him, ready to crush any intruder.

As always, the city was full of life. Birds fluted and chirruped from every tree. Jeweled carp flashed in the shaded pools and streams. Butterflies drifted on the air like floating blossoms. On the paving there were black-eyed snakes and amber scorpions. Baboons, jumping from the trees, noisily demanded attention. He glimpsed wandering smallbuck at each turn of the way.

But there were no other humans, ever.

Kuri steered his animal between a towering basalt jackal and a fanged leopard formed from living bone. Wild adapts peered from the windows of both. He smiled and waved to them, pleased that they, rather than the baboons, had found a way inside. The dromedary continued along the familiar way, following the curves of the Great Snake Building, and reached a courtyard surrounding a central pool. Here, he dismounted, leaving her to drink and graze at will. He lowered himself, gulping clear water from the pool, then pulling himself onto a marble bench in the shade of the palms and oleanders. He lay inert, cooled by a breeze that was free, here, from the taint of the volcano. When his strength had returned a little, he made for the largest of the buildings framing the courtyard, a giant crystal made in the shape of a krar; the place where ringlass was still being formed, year after year, century after century.

He knew exactly what he wanted.

It was dusk as he reached the lake. Beast had been wayward again and difficult to catch. He had stopped several times on the way to rest and drink. Now the volcano's fumes were black against the first stars. The comet already blazed in the eastern sky behind him.

There were two shapes in front of his house. The smaller bounded toward him, uttering squeals of delight. He clambered down, carrying a basket of the new ringlass, then he dismissed the dromedary with a slap on the rump. She loped off, grunting. Jade was upon him, springing onto her hind legs, trying to lick his face. The second, larger adapt hesitated, as if making to run away, but remained. Kuri heard a faint growl. The creature's tail was held high, bristling and defiant. It called to Jade, a plaintive mew. She looked back and answered, then darted away, stopping and looking back at Kuri.

"It's good, Jade," he said. "It's Brown Boy, isn't it? Go with him." But

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Jade, after touching noses with the other adapt, ran back to Kuri. Brown Boy trotted off into the shadow of the reed beds, from where he continued to call at intervals.

She had caught more fish for him, but, when he had cleaned them, he found himself unable to eat. Jade, as usual, devoured the entrails, but she was clearly worried, running up to him, saying, "Kuri eat. Kuri eat." When they went to bed, she nuzzled against him, but he said, "I can't make love to you any more, Jade. I'm too old, too tired." He stroked her belly.

He heard the other adapt calling from the reed beds. "Go with Brown Boy. He will give you cubs," he whispered.

But she would not.

Kuri continued his reconstruction of the east window. He removed the center of the solar shape, now a corona of pale golds and oranges, then fitted the inner circle with tiny beads of plain ringlass, something he had never used before on any of the windows. As he tuned this new work with his krar, his absorption deepened. He did not stop to eat—had no desire for food. Instead he drank—water, juice, more water. Even Jade's plaintive cries failed to distract him.

By night, the comet grew until its light was bright as moonlight.

Kuri completed his work on the third day. The new ringlass chimed in tune with the krar; the outer rings of colored glass resonated in harmony. He was satisfied.

At sunset, he found himself unable to stand. He crawled through the tunnel, then knelt on the sand facing the lake, waiting for the night. For the last time, he watched the sun plunge toward the water and stain it red as blood. He heard the farewell song of the west window. Jade crept up and crouched beside him, whimpering. He patted her head.

Darkness fell.

Then there was a new vibration, faint at first but soon emerging high and clear, like the resonance of a glass harp. A light rose behind Kuri, but he did not look back, but gazed transfixed at his creation.

The light struck the East Window. He saw the comet, brilliant as a second moon, reflected in the diamond-white center. He heard a voice reaching toward Earth from the depths of space, growing louder and clearer. The outer circles of the window chimed in marvelous harmony. And then, new and unexpected, the other windows took up the song—the blazing chords of the South, the wayward dissonance of the North, the trumpeted glory of the West. The dark dome vibrated, wavering before his eyes. He knew that startled birds took flight from the reeds, jackals cried in the distance. He could see shadows beside him. He realized that Brown Boy was beside Jade, that a small troop of adapts had formed a semicircle in front of the house.

But this was only a dim halo of awareness at the fringes of sight. With all his being, he gazed at the window onto Paradise, heard the music of the spheres.

He slumped forward.

* * *

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In the morning, Brown Boy called to Jade to come with him. She had lain the whole night in vigil beside Kuri's body, crying his name. Brown Boy nuzzled her gently. She looked up at him, questioning, pleading, her eyes reflecting the color of the lake. She rose and stretched, then paced with drooping tail to the edge of the water. He followed her, and, like her, scooped a mouthful of pumice pebbles. Following her lead, he deposited them on the curled body of the last in the line of his creators. Jade ran back for more pebbles. Brown Boy lifted his head and called. More adapts emerged from the reeds.

Soon, Kuri, the last of his kind, lay buried in the very place where his primal ancestors had first lifted their heads from the earth to ask "what?" and "why?"

The adapts spent one more night gazing in wonder at the white blaze of Kuri's window, swaying to the music that stirred their blood. At last, Brown Boy looped his tail about Jade's shoulders and drew her away to begin a new life.

The windows of Kuri's house continued to greet each phase of the day, but as the newcomer faded, the white heart of the East Window became silent until, perhaps, the comet should retrace its path in the years to come, to remind the Earth of the beings that had ruled it for so short a time.

But now the star that had been called Wormwood continued westward across Africa. Its brightness startled flocks of birds into wakefulness, caused great beasts to trumpet and bray, glinted in the eyes of prowling raptors and hopping rodents. It traced a path of wandering silver across the ocean, glinting on metaled dolphins and the gauzy wings of flying fish.

Somewhere along the coast of Brazil, a group of tree-like beings waved their branches in the wind. The branch tips brushed against each other, connections that wound and unwound. As the comet poured its light over them, the light-sensitive tips quested upward. Others whipped out, clasping their fellows.

"What?" they whispered. "Why?" ○

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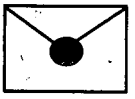

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The book-length version of Allen M. Steele's latest series of stories, *Coyote Rising,* will be out in hardcover from Ace in December. A third book, *Coyote Frontier,* will be published by Ace later next year. Mr. Steele tells us, "I'd like to thank *Asimov's* readers for their support of this series, as well as for *Coyote.* Your favorable response to this story-cycle has been greatly appreciated." This final tale in the second series, which follows the emotional tour de force of "Liberation Day" (October/November 2004), rewards the series' surviving characters with a . . .

HOME OF THE BRAVE

Allen M. Steele

The monster rose from the East Channel on a clear and sunny afternoon in late summer, a day so warm and fresh that it was as if the world had not skipped a season and a retrograde spring had finally come. The monster wasn't aware of these changes; for ten months he'd known only the darkness and cold of the silent depths that had been his prison. At long last he'd finally escaped, and now he emerged to see the sky again.

The creature that shambled out of the water was human-shaped and had a human mind, but he wasn't human. His ceramic-alloy body, once a burnished shade of chrome silver, was now dull and corroded; weeds clung to the creaking joints of his skeletal limbs, and dark mud caked the claw-like feet that sank deep into the coarse gravel of the river shore. His right leg, broken last autumn by gunfire at close range, had been braced with a piece of sunken wood lashed against it with lengths of tightly coiled weed; even then, he was only able to stand upright with the assistance of a water-logged tree branch he'd fashioned into a makeshift crutch. Within his skull-like head, only his right eye emitted a ruby glow; his left one had been shattered when he'd attempted to scale an underwater cliff, only to become half-blind when he slid back down and his face struck a sharp rock.

Ten months in the channel. Ten months by the Coyote calendar; by Gregorian reckoning, that was two and a half years. That's how long it

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had taken for him to find a way out of his watery tomb. A hundred feet down, there had been only the most wan light from far above. Trapped within a narrow canyon, he'd crawled along its belly through silt and sludge, dragging his broken leg behind him as he struggled through muck and the decaying carcasses of dead fish, until he finally discovered a slope he was able to climb. And even then, more than seventy feet separated him from the surface. It had been a long hike across the river bottom until he'd reached the shallows, and yet he'd done it. He had no choice but to survive; death was a gift he couldn't give himself.

For a long while, he stood upon the rocky beach, water drooling off his body, held upright only by the length of wood that he'd come to think of as his best friend. Sunlight registered feebly upon his remaining eye; lacking stereoscopic vision, everything seemed flat and one-dimensional.

Turning around, for the first time he saw where he was. The massive limestone bluffs of the Eastern Divide towered above him; a half-mile away, an immense wooden bridge rose above the channel, connecting New Florida to the distant shores of Midland. He remembered the bridge; he'd watched it being built, witnessed the act of sabotage that caused its mid-length spans to come crashing down. Yet now the bridge had been repaired; indeed, he could dimly make out forms moving along its roadway.

Seeing this, he felt a surge of joy. In his absence, the Matriarch had persevered. Once he returned to Liberty, she'd make sure that the ones who'd dared attempt to murder a Savant were brought to justice. She would not let their crimes go . . .

"Over here! It's over here!"

Hearing a child's voice shouting somewhere behind him, he looked around, saw a couple of small figures running toward him: two boys, carrying fishing rods. Lurching the rest of the way out of the water, he raised his free hand; one of the boys stopped, his face expressing fear. The other one slowed down, but continued forward, more curious than afraid.

"Who are you?" the boy demanded.

"S-s-s-sa . . ." Covered with sand, his vocoder made only a harsh noise; the boy stared at him quizzically until he adjusted the pitch and volume, tried again. "S-s-savant Manuel Castro. I . . ."

"What happened to you?" The boy stared at his broken leg. "You look like crap!"

He was unaccustomed to such impudence, especially from one so young. Nonetheless it was good to see another face, hear another voice. "I was captured by members of the resistance. They took me prisoner, then threw me off a raft several miles upstream. They tried to kill me, but as you see . . ."

A stone struck the side of his head.

Castro felt no pain, yet his vision blurred for a half-instant. Looking around, he saw the other boy pulling his arm back to hurl another rock at him. "A Savant! Tomas, get away! It's a Savant!"

"Stop that!" he shouted. "Under authority of the Matriarch, I order you to. . . !"

"You knew the Matriarch?" Tomas peered at him.

"Of course, the Matriarch Hernandez!" The other boy threw his rock,

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but it missed him, splashing into the water behind him. "Stop this! And tell me who you are!"

"I'm Tomas Conseco, and I'm taking you prisoner." Then Tomas kicked the crutch out from beneath his leg.

Castro toppled to the ground, and the boys attacked him. He wrapped his left arm across his face to shield his remaining eye, as for several long minutes they kicked him and pelted him with stones and gravel. When they finally got tired of their sport, the boys grabbed him by the arms and began dragging him across the beach. He was impressed by their strength; only hatred could lend so much muscle to those so young. For a moment, he thought they were going to pitch him back into the channel—which would have been a blessing—but instead they hauled him toward the bridge. Yet the worst indignity came when Tomas opened the fly of his trousers, and, with hideous glee, urinated upon him.

It was at this point that the Savant Manuel Castro, former lieutenant governor of New Florida, realized that many things had changed while he'd been away.

On the eve of First Landing Day, Liberty was busy preparing itself for the festivities.

As he strode through town, Carlos saw townspeople suspending pennants between wood-frame houses, stringing lights above their windows. Out in front of the grange hall, vendors and craftspeople were setting up tents; the early arrivals had already put out their wares upon benches and tables: handmade clothing, catskin boots and gloves, cookware and cutlery, labor-saving devices for the frontier home both complex and simple, hand-carved children's toys. Shags carrying visitors from the Midland colonies shambled down Main Street, with proctors directing them to stables where the beasts could be kept while their owners found temporary lodging either with friends or in one of the boarding houses in Shuttlefield.

And everywhere Carlos looked, the new flag of the Coyote Federation rose from poles or hung from porches; it had even been painted across the faux-birch walls of some of the houses that had recently been built along the side streets. Despite his dark mood, the sight gave him a certain sense of satisfaction. During all the public meetings he'd chaired as mayor, not even the long debates over the exact wording of the various articles of the Liberty Compact had raised as much ire as the ones pertaining to the flag's design, and it wasn't until Vonda Cayle presented her compromise—the Ursae Majoris constellation, transposed upon three horizontal bars of red, white, and blue—that all sides were satisfied. Now that the "Big Dipper" had been formally adopted, everyone took pride in it; at least it wasn't as scary as the one proposed by the Forest Camp delegation, which featured a snarling coyote above the slogan "Don't Mess With Me!"

The long, cold summer of '06 was almost over, and everyone was ready for a party; yet this wasn't what occupied his mind at the moment. Ignoring the bunting and decorations, giving only passing nods and handwaves to citizens who called his name, he headed for the windowless log cabin at the end of the street. First Landing Day could wait; just now, there was some family business that needed to be settled.

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The chief proctor was waiting for him outside. "She's in there," Chris said, then held up a hand as Carlos marched toward the door. "Look, wait a minute . . ."

"Wait for what?" Carlos started to walk around him, but Chris stepped in his way. "How many times have your guys brought her in? Two? Three?"

"It's the fourth . . . but it's more serious than that." Chris dropped his voice. "This time she's put someone in the infirmary."

Carlos stopped, stared at him. It wasn't the first time Marie had been taken into custody by the blueshirts; on three occasions his sister been charged with public drunkenness, and the last time she'd also faced charges of assault and battery stemming from a brawl in which she'd been involved. "What happened?"

"Lars was with her," Chris said quietly. "They picked a fight with some guys from Forest Camp. About what, I don't know, but Lars threw the first punch."

"So it was just a fight."

"It got worse. Witnesses say she broke a bottle and slashed someone's face with it. Wendy just called, told me that she's had to put ten stitches just below the right eye." Chris paused. "Sorry, man, but that's assault with a deadly weapon. I can't look the other way this time."

Carlos nodded. The first two incidents, he'd asked Chris to do nothing more than lock her up for the night. The third time, he used his position as mayor to persuade the magistrates to be lenient with her; grudgingly, they had only sentenced her to house arrest and four weeks of public service, the minimum penalty under Colony Law.

"All right. I understand." Chris was right; this time, she'd gone too far. Carlos ran a hand through his hair as he forced himself to calm down. "Is Lars with her?" Chris nodded. "Let me talk to them, please."

Like other buildings erected during the first year of the colony's existence, the stockade had recently been expanded. The original log cabin—where, ironically enough, Chris himself had been interred on several occasions before he'd straightened himself out—now served as his office; the new part was built of fieldstone and cement and served as the county jail. Unlocking a solid blackwood door, Chris led Carlos down a narrow corridor of stone cells fronted with iron bars; at the end of the corridor, Carlos found his sister.

"Heard you coming a mile away." Marie lay on her back upon a small bunk, one arm cast across her forehead. "You should keep your voice down," she added, pointing to the tiny window above her. "I could hear you through there."

"If your ears are that good, then you know what we were talking about."

"I only said I heard your voice. Didn't say I know what you said." Marie sighed. "Okay, all right. I'm sorry. Won't do it again, I promise. Now would you get my shoes back? My feet are cold."

"Mine too." In the cell across from hers, Lars Thompson sat on his bunk, holding a blood-soaked tissue to his nose. "Hell, you think I'm going to kill myself just because I pounded some lumberjack?"

"Looks like that lumberjack got in a few pounds of his own," Carlos

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said, and Lars glowered at him with mutual disdain. Carlos had never liked Lars, not even when he'd been a member of Rigil Kent, and especially not since he'd become his sister's boyfriend. Lars had been in trouble before, too, but his uncle was Clark Thompson, the leader of Blue Company during the Battle of New Florida, now a member of the Liberty Town Council. Like Marie, Lars had also benefited from family influence.

"I understand you started it." Carlos folded his arms as he leaned against the bars of Lars's cell. "Want to tell me why?"

Lars said nothing. "He was sticking up for the corps," Marie said, lacing her hands together behind her head. "This guy claimed that, if it hadn't been for Bob Lee . . ."

"Robert Lee." Carlos hated it when people called the captain by a nickname he'd detested when he was alive. Especially those who knew better.

"Whatever . . . if it hadn't been for him, there was no way we'd have taken down the Union. That we were outnumbered, outgunned . . ."

"And he was right," Carlos said. Lars started to object, but he stared him down. "Go on. You were saying. . . ?"

"So one thing came to another, and . . . aw, c'mon, Carlos! Where was he when we crossed the East Channel? I asked him, and he said he was taking care of his wife and kid!"

"We asked for volunteers, not conscripts." She began to argue, but he raised his hand. "So you two decided to defend the honor of Rigil Kent. Is that it?"

"Hell, yeah!" Lars stood up, advanced toward the bars. Carlos could see the dried blood on the front of his shirt; how much of it was his own, and how much was someone else's, there was no way of knowing. "And what would you have done?"

"Oh, I don't know." Carlos shrugged. "Asked if he had a picture of his family? Offered him a drink? Proposed a toast to Captain Lee?" He ignored Lars, looked straight at his sister. "Anything but open his face with a broken bottle. I understand Wendy had to put some stitches in him. I wonder how he's going to explain that to his wife and kid the next time he's sees them. He's just lucky to be able to see 'em at all. . . ."

"I wasn't trying to hurt him." Her voice became very small. "Just give him a scratch."

A sarcastic retort hovered on his lips. Instead, he regarded her for a few moments, once again wondering what had happened to his sister. He'd discussed this with Dr. Okada, in her capacity as chief physician; although psychology wasn't her specialty, it was her opinion that Marie was afflicted with some sort of personality disorder. She'd come of age waging guerilla warfare; when she should have been engaging in the usual rites of puberty, instead she'd been learning how to shoot people with a high-powered rifle. Indeed, she'd even taken pleasure in her task; even if she wasn't a sociopath, her lack of remorse put her close to the edge.

Or maybe it was just that she and Lars didn't know what do with themselves now that the revolution was over. The remaining members of the Union Guard had long since left Coyote; the Colonies were at peace. Everyone else had put down their guns and picked up hammers and nails. Even Lars's younger brother Garth, who'd been bloodthirsty in his own right, had

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helped build the greenhouses that had helped keep everyone alive. But perhaps there were bound to be a few who weren't ready to stop fighting, if only because that's all they'd leaned how to do. . . .

Nonetheless, he couldn't tolerate this any longer. "I don't know what I'm going to do with you," he said, "but if you think you can just let this pass, you're . . ."

His com unit chirped just then. As much as he wanted to ignore it, he plucked it from his belt, held it to his ear. "Mayor's office," he said, trying to ignore Lars's sniggering.

"*Carlos, it's Jaime from AirMed.*" That would be Jaime Hodge, a gyro pilot with Liberty's medical airlift team. "*We've just picked up someone from Bridgeton and we're flying him in. Touching down in Shuttlefield in ten minutes.*"

Carlos let out his breath. He turned away from Marie's cell. "Jaime, can this wait? I'm in the middle of . . ."

"*You may want to get over there. It's Manuel Castro . . . we've found him.*"

Carlos's hand trembled on the phone; he tightened his grip to keep from dropping it. The last person in the world he'd ever expected to turn up again. . . .

"I understand," he said quietly. "Don't let anyone else know about this."

"*Sure. He's in pretty bad shape. We've already called ahead to the infirmary, and they're sending down the ambulance to meet us.*"

"I'll meet you there." Carlos clicked off, then turned to Chris. "Something's come up. Keep 'em here until their arraignment. I'll inform the magistrates that we need to . . ."

"Carlos!" Marie jumped off the bed, rushed to the bars. "I'm your sister! You can't . . ."

"Sorry, kid, but you and your boyfriend have crossed the line." He reluctantly gazed back at her. "Nothing I can do."

"You're the mayor! You can . . . come back here!"

But he was already walking away, trying not to hear her voice as it rose to become an angry shriek that followed him down the cell block. Even after he shut the door, he still heard the obscenities she shouted at him.

Manuel Castro lay motionless upon an examination table in the Shuttlefield infirmary's emergency room, his robotic form incongruous in a place meant for flesh-and-blood humans. Nonetheless, Wendy had propped a pillow beneath his head and draped a sheet over his body; Carlos found her with the savant, her hands in the pockets of her smock.

"A couple of kids from Bridgeton found him near the bridge," she said. "Apparently he'd just dragged himself out of the channel. They were beating on him when some adults spotted them. They got them to stop, then called AirMed . . ."

"A couple of kids?" Carlos found this hard to believe.

"Well, he was in pretty sad shape to start with, being underwater for so long." She shrugged. "And since it sounds like they were recent immigrants, they had it in for the first savant they'd seen since the revolution. I got the name of one of them. Tomas Conseco, from the *Spirit* . . ."

"Never mind." No point in trying to press charges; he wouldn't have

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been able to make them stick. Everyone had a grudge against the Union, even the children. "How's he doing?" Carlos peered at Castro. The savant hadn't moved since he'd arrived. "Has he said anything?"

"Not since we got him here." Wendy gently pulled aside the sheet. "Right leg is broken . . . he'd tied a splint around it to stand upright . . . and the left eye is shattered. We should be able to fix the leg, but the eye may be irreplaceable." She shook her head. "What am I saying? This is beyond me. He needs a mechanic, not a doctor."

"All the same, I'm pleased to see you again, Wendy." Castro's voice, a modulated purr from his chest grill, startled them; Wendy dropped the sheet, automatically stepped away. "You are Wendy Gunther, aren't you? It's been many years since the last time I saw you."

"Yes . . . yes, it has." She stammered a bit, trying to regain her composure. Carlos wondered why he'd remained quiet. Probably to assess the situation. "I'm surprised you recognize me."

"You've grown quite a bit, yet your voice is still much the same." Castro's own voice sounded reedy; the vocoder had been damaged during the months he'd spent underwater. He turned his head slightly, fixing his remaining eye upon Carlos. "But you, I don't recognize. Who might you be?"

"Carlos Montero, the mayor of . . ."

"Oh, my . . . Rigil Kent himself." A buzz from the grill that might have been laughter. "You don't know how long I've waited to meet you, Mr. Montero. The matriarch was quite obsessed with finding you. And now you've become . . . what did you say you were the mayor of?"

"Liberty. And also Shuttlefield, since that's now part of Lee County."

"Lee County. And you're now its leader . . . elected, I take it." Carlos nodded. "Then it's reasonable to assume that Robert Lee is no longer with us?"

"No, he isn't. He . . ." Carlos stopped himself. "You've been gone a long time, Savant Castro. Things are quite a bit different now."

"So I take it. You know, when I was lieutenant governor, I sincerely doubt that a child would have dared to relieve himself upon me." Again, the odd buzz. "I take it that Luisa Hernandez is no longer the colonial governor and that there has been . . . shall we say, a change of government?"

"That's correct." No point in telling him, at least for the time being, that the matriarch was dead as well. He'd learn these things in due course. "We never expected to see you again. You were reported lost in action during the Battle of Thompson's Ferry."

"Lost in action. That's one way of putting it, I suppose. And who said so, may I ask?"

"Umm . . ." Carlos had to search his memory. "Clark Thompson. He and his nephews said that they attempted to capture you, but that you fled from the scene. After that, you were never seen again."

"Thompson said that, did he?" The savant turned his head to gaze up at the ceiling. "A slight embellishment of the truth. I guess he didn't want to admit to throwing me off his raft in the middle of the channel. You know, it took nearly three weeks for the ropes he'd used to tie my hands behind my back to loosen enough for me to free my hands? This may be a mechanical body, Carlos . . . or should I call you Rigil? . . . but three weeks is a long time to lie on your back in a hundred feet of water."

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Carlos felt his face grow warm. Glancing at Wendy, he saw the look of horror in her eyes. "He never told us that," he said quietly. "He just said that you . . . ran away."

"Every war has its share of atrocities, Mayor Montero, and the victors always have the liberty of revising history. Why should this conflict be any different?" The savant turned his head slightly, gazing at the white-washed blackwood walls, the rows of faux-birch cabinets containing surgical instruments. "A lovely hospital, Dr. Gunther. I had a chance to look at it while your people were bringing me in. New, isn't it?"

"Built last summer. Savant Castro. . . ."

"Please, call me Manny. I asked you to do so when we met aboard the *Glorious Destiny*." He paused. "Orifiel, Gabriel 17, c.y. 03. And today is Camael, Uriel 46, c.y. 06. My internal chronometer has remained functional, and my long-term memory is perfect. It's one of the few things that helped keep me sane."

Carlos nodded. He had to remember that, despite all appearances, there was a human mind within that mechanical body. Something that Clark Thompson and his boys had conveniently forgotten. "Savant Castro . . . Manny . . . a lot of things have changed. The Western Hemisphere Union is no longer in control of New Florida. In fact, the last Union starship departed almost five and a half months ago, along with the rest of the Guard. Since then, Coyote experienced severe climate changes because of a volcano eruption on Midland. We managed to survive, but only because we built greenhouses to . . ."

"This is all fascinating, Mr. Mayor, and I'm sure I'll enjoy learning the rest of it in due time. But just now, one thing alone interests me."

Castro pushed aside the sheet, then used his arms to raise himself upright. Turning himself around, he allowed Wendy to help him sit up on the examination table. If not for his damaged leg, he could have walked away at any time.

"As you say," he continued, "ten months have passed. I went into the East Channel the lieutenant governor of a colony, and came out a cripple at the mercy of a pair of brats. If the Union is no longer here, then I'm clearly both out of time and out of place. So there's only question that matters . . . what are you going to do with me?"

Wendy said nothing. Carlos shook his head. "I can't tell you that," he said at last. "The truth is, I don't know."

A hollow boom from somewhere in the fields just outside town, then a tiny rocket shot up into the night sky, its vapor trail forming an arc that carried it high above the rooftops of Liberty. A couple of seconds later it exploded, creating a red fire-blossom that flung sparks across the pale blue orb of Bear.

The crowds gathered in the streets applauded and shouted in delight, then watched as another skyrocket launched behind the first one. Carlos tried to remember the last time he'd seen fireworks; when he did, the memory came with a sharp pang of regret. July 4, 2070, the summer evening he and his family had been taken into custody by the Prefects. His last night on Earth, a lifetime ago . . .

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"Aren't you enjoying this?" Wendy sat next to him on the porch of their house. Not far away, Susan played in the backyard with a few of her friends. First Landing Day wasn't until the next day, but the organizing committee had decided to schedule the fireworks a night early. Tomorrow would be marked by the crafts fair, a baseball game, a shag race, a concert by the Coyote Wind Ensemble, and, at the end of the day, the big dinner at the grange hall. Just like Independence Day back on Earth, only this time without mass-arrests of dissident intellectuals.

"Who says I'm not?" Carlos reached for the jug of ale on the table between them, poured some more into his mug. "I think it's really pretty."

"Then why the frown?" Wendy took the jug from him, poured another drink for herself. "You're thinking about Marie, aren't you?"

Actually, he wasn't . . . or at least not at this moment. Oddly enough, he realized that his thoughts had been more upon Manuel Castro, about what he'd said earlier this afternoon. Marie and Lars would doubtless receive a stiff sentence for what they'd done today: at least six months in the stockade, plus hard time working on public service projects: road construction, laying sewage pipes, digging drainage ditches, the lousy jobs that no one wanted to do. Not that this would matter much to either of them, at least in the long run. Ever since the Union Guard had been ousted and Chris had overhauled the proctors, crime had become infrequent enough that townspeople remembered who the perpetrators were and what they'd done. There were people in Liberty whom everyone remembered as being bullies and thugs from the days of the squatter camps, and almost universally they were distrusted and disliked. So even after Marie and Lars served their sentence, they'd return to the community as ostracized members . . . and Carlos foresaw that this would just make them even more bitter than they'd been before.

Even so, there was always a chance that they'd eventually be accepted again, just as he'd been many years ago after he returned from his time alone on the Great Equatorial River. On the other hand, Manny Castro would never be a part of the community. He couldn't change what he was, and as such he was a living reminder to everyone of the Union occupation of Coyote. The tents and shacks of Shuttlefield were gone, replaced by rows of wood-frame houses built during the course of the spring and summer, but no one who once lived there was likely to forget that Savant Castro had once served as the matriarch's right-hand man.

They'd done well these past few months; indeed, even better than anyone had expected. Two days after the last Union shuttle lifted off and the bodies of the dead—including Captain Lee—had been laid to rest, an *ad hoc* committee convened at the grange hall to formulate survival plans for the colonies on New Florida and Midland. Everyone knew that time was of the essence; the eruption of Mt. Bonestell meant that Coyote's northern hemisphere would experience cold temperatures for at least four to six months, with the resultant loss of crops. So the first priority was to build greenhouses; with available timber on New Florida at a premium, it was decided that the Garcia Narrows Bridge had to be repaired as soon as possible. Once that was done . . .

Carlos watched as another skyrocket bloomed above town. Everything

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had fallen into place after that. The bridge was quickly repaired, enabling teams of loggers to journey across the East Channel to the dense rain forests of Midland; blackwood and faux-birch were felled and hauled by shags to the lumber yards of Forest Camp and Bridgeton, where they were milled into wood planks for the construction of enormous greenhouses and solar-heated sheds for the livestock. Now that the war was over, there was no shortage of colonists to assist in this crash program; for weeks on end, the air had been filled with the sounds of nails being hammered into wood as structures half the size of football fields rose up in the place once occupied by squatter camps. The towns of Defiance and New Boston received lumber in exchange for sending men to join the labor force, but although the provisional government extended an open invitation to the Midland settlers to return to New Florida, many preferred to stay where they were. Only Shady Grove, the small town that had once existed beneath the shadow of Mt. Bonestell, remained abandoned, buried beneath volcanic ashes.

Even as the greenhouses were rising and the surplus lumber was being used for the construction of new homes, the Coyote Federation was being formed, and just as foul-smelling communal outhouses were being leveled to make way for sewage pipes and septic systems, social collectivism was replaced by democracy, with individual rights guaranteed by the statutes of the Liberty Compact.

It was a hard year, with some days in Muriel so cold that snow had fallen from leaden skies and ice had formed along the creek banks. Yet no one froze to death in a tent; everyone had to tighten their belts a little, but no one starved. Although there were quite a few complaints, no one loaded their guns and marched on the grange hall, where the newly elected mayor of Liberty spent every waking hour struggling to figure out how to keep several thousand people alive during the cold summer of c.y. 06.

At long last, the skies had begun to clear, the days had become warm again. It wouldn't last long—a brief Indian summer before the autumn solstice only a few weeks away—but they would survive another winter. And, indeed, perhaps even come out better than they had before. . . .

Another skyrocket; the crowds yelled in response. Carlos was blind to it all, though, and deaf to the thunderclaps and shouting. "Excuse me," he said, standing up from his rocker. "Just need to stretch my legs."

"Sure." Wendy watched as he walked down off the porch, ignoring the children playing tag nearby. She'd become accustomed to his long silences. "Take your time."

How far they'd come. Clean streets; no more trash along the sides of the road. Warm houses; the original log cabins still stood, yet he and Wendy were among the few who still lived in them. A long row of wind turbines just outside Shuttlefield, providing electrical power to everyone. A new infirmary, with free medical treatment guaranteed for all. A schoolhouse was going up soon. And yet . . .

It's yours . . .

Once again, Robert Lee's last words came back to haunt him. He might have taken Lee's place, but he could never fill the long shadow the man had left behind. He'd picked up the torch, but what good was it if he couldn't use it to shed light?

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Oh, his people would survive, all right. And now that the clouds had parted, there was hope of a short growing season before another long winter came upon them. But it wasn't enough just to survive, was it? If their existence upon this world—indeed, their reasons for coming to Coyote in the first place—were to mean something, then it had to be something more than keeping a roof over their heads and food in their bellies. Even the most brutal dictatorship can guarantee that; freedom had to stand for something else. . . .

Meanwhile, his own sister sat in a jail cell across from her lover, two malcontents with nothing to do with their time but pick fights. What did freedom mean to them? And there was Manuel Castro, once thought to be dead, now returned to life, only to find himself alone in a world in which he had no place. What good was freedom to him?

A long time ago, Carlos had sought freedom. A canoe, a rifle, a cook pot, a tent . . . that was all he'd needed. Three months alone on the Great Equatorial River, and he'd managed to get as far as the Meridian Archipelago. To this day, no one else had explored Coyote as much as he had; the war had prevented it. And there was an entire world out there. . . .

From somewhere close by, his ears picked up a musical sound: a lilting melody, carried by a dozen flutes in harmony. Allegra DiSilvio, rehearsing her ensemble for the concert tomorrow. Chris's mother would be playing with them; under Allegra's tutalege, Sissy had become an accomplished musician, and to see her today one would never believe that she'd once been a hermit living on the outskirts of Shuttlefield. Indeed, lately she'd been spending a lot of time with Ben Harlan. It only made sense; both had suffered the loss of loved ones since they'd come to Coyote, and both had seen the darker side of the human soul. And just last month, much to Carlos's surprise, Allegra had moved in with Chris. She was nearly old enough to be his mother, but apparently the age difference meant little to either of them. Chris had been the first person on Coyote to show her any kindness, after all, and on this world, such tenderness went a long way.

So Chris had taken his mother's best friend as his lover, while Sissy herself had found someone to replace his father. It was a strange relationship, but . . . Carlos smiled at the thought. New families appearing to replace ones that had been lost. On the frontier, the heart finds its own way.

The music faltered, stopped for a few moments, then started again. "Soldier's Joy," an ancient song from the American Civil War. Captain Lee's ancestor had probably marched his troops into combat with this tune, hundreds of years ago. Back when America had been a frontier, just as Coyote was now. . . .

Inspiration stopped him cold in his tracks. A crazy idea, possibly irresponsible . . .

But perhaps, just perhaps . . .

Clark Thompson met him outside the vehicle shed, down by Sand Creek near the boathouse. Dark circles beneath his eyes testified that he hadn't slept well last night; Carlos had little doubt that he'd stayed up late, discussing the mayor's proposal with his wife and younger nephew.

"They're waiting inside," Carlos said as Thompson approached. "Chris

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brought them down from the stockade just a few minutes ago. I haven't said anything to them about this yet." He hesitated. "It's your decision, y'know. You can always call it off."

"I know that." Thompson was not only Lars' legal guardian, but also a senior member of the Town Council. He could veto this proposal with just one word. "Before I tell you what I've decided, let me ask you one thing. Do you really think this is the right thing to do?"

Carlos didn't answer at once. Instead, he gazed at the first amber light of dawn, just beginning to break upon town. He remembered when he'd set out on his own, in a small canoe he'd built with his own hands, on a long journey that would eventually take him nearly halfway around the world. That morning had been almost exactly like this one.

"I can't . . . I don't know." He owed Clark an honest answer. "If you're asking me if I think this is wise, then I have to ask if you think it's wiser to let them sit in the stockade till next spring. . . ?"

"At least then they'll be safe there. We'll know where they are."

"Perhaps, but I don't believe that'll solve anything. They'll just come out more hardened than before, and then we'll just have the same problem again. This way, maybe they'll grow up a little . . . and we might learn something as well."

Thompson nodded. "That's sort of what I've been thinking, too. Of course, it's a hell of a risk."

"They're used to taking risks. Maybe that's the problem. They've lived on the edge so long they can't cope with peace and quiet. And it's not like we're asking them to do something they haven't . . ."

"It is, but . . ." Thompson looked down at the ground, shuffled his feet a bit. "Y'know, I can't help but wonder if this isn't partly my fault. I made that boy grow up tough. Hell, I made him shove Castro over the side of that raft. I didn't know he'd . . . y'know, turn out this way."

Carlos bit his lip. He thought of how things could have been different with his sister. Marie should never have been allowed to carry a gun; she was too damn young. . . . "None of us knew. We were caught in something we didn't know how to control. We got what we wanted, and now we're paying the price."

"Yeah, well . . ." Thompson shrugged. "And you say the magistrates approve?"

"I spoke with them last night, after I dropped by to talk to you and Molly. They said that if you gave your approval, this was acceptable to them as well."

Thompson said nothing for a few moments. At last he looked up. "Very well, Mr. Mayor, I say yes."

Carlos let out his breath. "Thank you, sir. Do you want to come in with me while I. . . ?"

Thompson firmly shook his head. "No. I don't want Lars trying to talk his way out through me. And maybe it's just as well if I turn my back on him."

There was a trace of tears in the older man's eyes. This must be tougher on him than he cared to admit. "I understand," Carlos said quietly. "I'll let you know how it goes."

Thompson nodded, then without another word turned and walked

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away, heading back to his place. Carlos watched him go, then opened the door and walked in.

The vehicle shed had been built by the Carpenters' Guild during the Union occupation; a large, barnlike structure, it contained most of the ground vehicles left behind by the Guard. Skimmers of various makes and sizes, a couple of hover bikes, the disassembled fuselage of a gyro that had been cannibalized for spare parts. Someone had switched on the lights. Near the front of the room, Lars and Marie sat upon a couple of crates, with Chris and another proctor standing guard nearby, stunguns inside open holsters upon their belts.

"Stand up," Carlos said, shutting the door behind him. "We've got something to talk about."

"Not till we've had breakfast." Marie glared at him with the gaze of a petulant child, and didn't move from where she was sitting. "You're supposed to feed us, y'know."

"Was that my uncle out there? I thought I heard him." Lars lifted his head, raised his voice. "Hey! Uncle Clark! Come in here and tell this fascist to get us some food!"

"Your uncle doesn't want to speak to you." Carlos kept his voice even. "To tell the truth, he's turned his back on you." He looked straight at Marie. "And I'm about to do the same."

Her mouth fell open. "What are you. . . ?"

"Shut up."

"Aw, c'mon. We haven't eaten since . . ."

"I said, *shut up!*"

His shout rang from the sides of the craft parked around them. Marie visibly flinched, and the smirk disappeared from Lars's face. "This isn't a breakfast meeting," Carlos went on, stepping a littler closer. "No coffee and biscuits for you two, and no one leaves this building until we're done. And I thought I told you to get to your feet . . . so do it, *now!*"

Marie stood up, her legs shaking. When Lars didn't move, Carlos glanced at Chris. The chief proctor stepped forward, pulling his stungun from his belt. Seeing this from the corner of his eye, Lars hastily rose from the crate, yet he wasn't done giving Carlos lip. "Class act, Mr. Mayor. Out of the way place, no one around to watch, the maggies nowhere in sight. And two blueshirts to do the dirty work." He glanced at Marie. "I told you the power's gone to his head."

Marie wasn't nearly so brave. "Carlos," she murmured, her mouth trembling with newfound fear, "I'm your sister. You can't let them do this. It's not right."

For an instant, he saw once more the little girl who'd bugged him to read her bedtime stories when their father was too busy with his work. But she was an adult now, and very close to becoming someone he'd never recognize again. He had to do this, for her own sake.

"Whatever you think I'm going to do, you're wrong." Carlos lowered his voice. "No one's going to touch you. You're going to walk out of here without a scratch. Which is more than I can say for the poor guy you attacked yesterday."

"Well, when we see the maggies . . ." Lars started.

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"You're not seeing the magistrates. There's not going to be a court date for you . . . or at least not unless you insist. But I've met with them already, and I've been told that, if they find you guilty, you'll spend the next six months in the stockade." He peered more closely at him. "Six months Coyote-time, and Chris here will make sure you and Marie are assigned to cells as far apart as possible. The only time you'll see the sun is when they let you out to clean the septic tanks and dig ditches, and in the middle of winter that can be a real bitch."

"You'd do that, wouldn't you?" Marie's eyes were cold.

"You bet. I'll see to it personally that your time is as hard as I can make it." He looked at Chris. "You with me on this?"

"Oh, yeah." Chris gave them his most callous grin. "I've got a lot of lousy jobs for y'all to handle. And it's funny how often I forget to turn the lights off or change the sheets."

"On the other hand," Carlos went on, "there's an alternative. Something a couple of hard cases like you are well-suited for. . . ."

He sauntered past them to a Union Guard patrol skimmer parked nearby. "You've seen this kind of machine before. Marie, I remember that you once identified it for me . . . an Armadillo AC-IIb. Just like the one we captured on Goat Kill Creek."

"Uh-huh. Even got a chance to operate it." She gave the skimmer a passing glance. "Let me guess. You want us to clean it."

"No, I want you to take it."

She stared at him. "You want us to . . . what?"

"You heard me. I want you and Lars to take it." Carlos slapped his hand on its armored hull. "Drive it out of here. Leave, go away. Go exploring. We'll equip you with one month's rations, two rifles and ammo, a med kit, sleeping bags, tents, lamps . . . whatever you need to survive. Even a satphone so you can report in. The Union left a comsat network in orbit, so you'll be able to keep in touch."

"I don't . . . I don't . . ." Marie shook her head in confusion. "I mean . . ."

"What's the catch?" Lars regarded the skimmer with astonishment. "I mean, you can't just be . . . y'know, cutting us loose like this without some strings attached."

"Oh, there's strings attached, all right." Leaning against the skimmer, Carlos held up a finger. "First, you can't stay on New Florida, or head for Midland. If you're seen by any of our scouting parties, or try to enter any of the settlements, you'll be arrested and sent back here. I don't want to see you for the next six months, at least. After that, you're free to return."

"But if you're only giving us one month of rations. . . ."

"Then I guess you'll have to live off the land. But you two spent time in Rigil Kent . . . you know how to hunt and fish." Carlos held up another finger. "Second . . . once every forty-eight hours, you use the radio to report to me personally. Tell me where you are . . . and, more importantly, what you've seen. I don't care if it's nothing but swamp or grassland or another hill, I want to know what you've found out there."

"You want us to just . . ." Marie waved a hand in some imagined direction. "Go exploring. Wander around. Look for stuff."

"That's right. In the six years we've been here, no one has yet crossed

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the West Channel to see what's in Great Dakota, or gone north to check out Medsylvania, or seen the Northern Equatorial River. The war's kept us too busy. So you're going to be our scouts. Do that for the next six months, and you can consider your sentences commuted as time served for the benefit of the Coyote Federation."

"Uh-huh. Just the two of us." Lars gave Marie a lascivious grin. "Oh, I think we can go along with . . ."

"No. Not just the two of you. I think you need mature guidance from a responsible adult." Stepping away from the skimmer, Carlos turned toward the rear of the shed. "Manny? If you'd join us, please?"

The savant detached himself from beneath the shadows of the skimmer behind which he'd been hiding. He limped slightly upon his left leg, restored to near-complete motor function by a couple of machinists, and he remained blind in one eye, but his body had been cleaned up and once again he wore the black robe that had been taken from him by Clark Thompson.

"It'd be my pleasure." His left eye gleamed as he turned his head toward Lars. "I believe we've already met. Thank you for such a delightful swim. I thoroughly enjoyed it."

"Uh-uh!" Lars backed away. "No way I'm going with this . . . this. . . !"

"Yes, you are," Carlos said. "Not only that, but I expect you to treat him with all due respect, because if he doesn't come *back* with you . . ."

"I assure you, Mr. Mayor, I intend to survive this trip." Castro hobbled toward Lars, extended a claw from beneath his robe. "We have much to talk about, Mr. Thompson. Or may I call you Lars? My friends call me Manny."

Marie turned to Carlos. "You're not giving us a choice, are you?"

"Sure, I am." Carlos touched her shoulder. "Come here . . ."

He led her away from the others, shaking his head at the nearby blueshirt when he tried to follow them. "This is how you're going to grow up," he murmured once they were alone. "You're getting freedom, and all the responsibility that comes with it. It's the same choice our parents had when they decided to come here. It's the choice I had many years ago. And now it's your turn."

"I . . . I don't . . ." The corners of her eyes glistened. "I don't know what to do. I don't know where to go."

"Nobody does," he said softly. "We just have to make it up as we go along." He gave her a hug, kissed her gently on the cheek. "It's your world now. Go find it . . . and come back safe."

And then, before he could give himself a chance to reconsider, he released her. Turning his back on his sister, Carlos walked away, not looking back until after he'd shut the door behind him.

Morning had come upon Liberty, cool and quiet, with a warm breeze drifting in from the south. Roosters crowed within pens, answered by the barking of dogs, the nagging of billy goats. He could smell the aroma of breakfast being prepared within a thousand kitchens, hear the faint sounds of townspeople rising to do their chores. Another day upon Coyote had begun.

Tucking his hands in his pockets, Carlos Montero began walking back toward town. Ready to see what awaited him today in the land of the free, the home of the brave. ○

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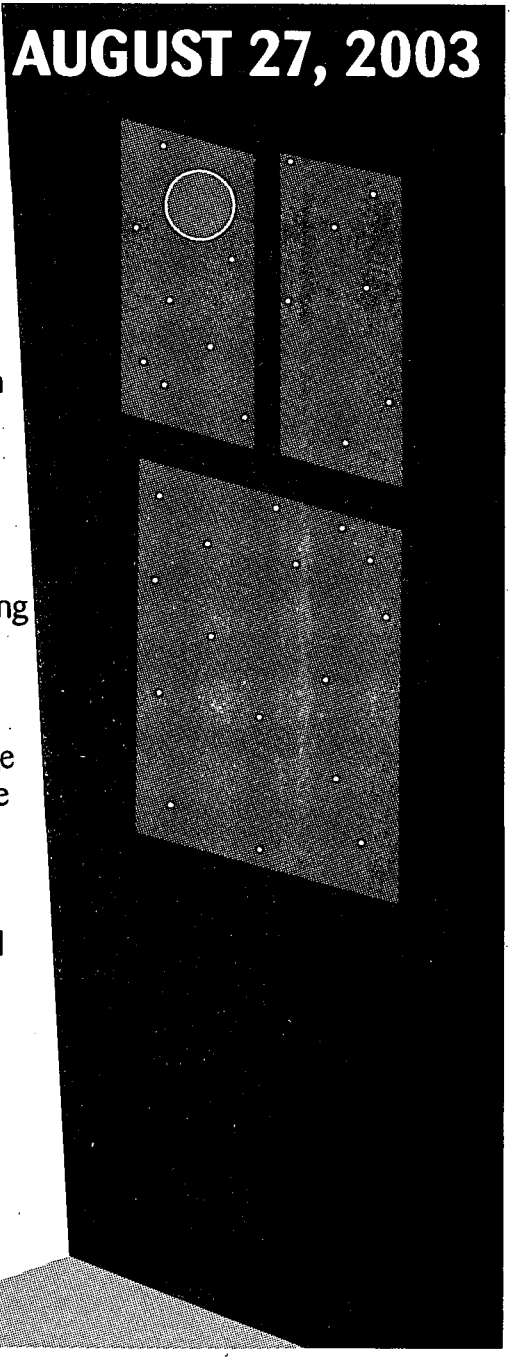
MIDNIGHT, AUGUST 27, 2003



Mars is at its
closest approach tonight
just outside my bedroom
window,

and I have nothing
available to magnify it with
but a pair of old
binoculars,

which gazing through
earlier made it look like
a red-orange golf ball sailing
off erase into the night.

So I'm stuck with
second hand news footage
for this once in my lifetime
close encounter,

that and an aging
imagination which can still
remember canals and
ghostly Martians,

and the possibility that
intelligent life beyond our
planet was once as close
as right next door.

—G.O. Clark

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A PRINCESS OF EARTH

Mike Resnick

When Mike Resnick's "Robots Don't Cry" made this year's Hugo ballot, it was his seventeenth *Asimov's* story to be so honored. His novel, *The Return of Santiago,* is out in paperback from Tor, and *A Gathering of Widowmakers* will appear sometime next year.

When Lisa died I felt like my soul had been ripped out of my body, and what was left wasn't worth the powder to blow it to hell. To this day I don't even know what she died of; the doctors tried to tell me why she had collapsed and what had killed her, but I just tuned them out. She was dead and I would never talk to her or touch her again, never share a million unimportant things with her, and that was the only fact that mattered. I didn't even go to the funeral; I couldn't bear to look at her in her coffin.

I quit my job—we'd been counting the days to my retirement so we could finally spend all our time together—and I considered selling the house and moving to a smaller place, but in the end I couldn't do it. There was too much of her there, things I'd lose forever if I moved away.

I left her clothes in the closet, just the way they'd always been. Her hairbrush and her perfume and her lipstick remained on the vanity where she'd kept them neatly lined up. There was a painting of a New England landscape that I'd never liked much, but since she had loved it I left it hanging where it was. I had my favorite photos of her blown up and framed, and put them on every table and counter and shelf in the house.

I had no desire to be with other people, so I spent most of my days catching up on my reading. Well, let me amend that. I started a lot of books; I finished almost none of them. It was the same thing with movies: I'd rent a few, begin playing them, and usually turn them off within fifteen or twenty minutes. Friends would invite me out, I'd refuse, and after awhile they stopped calling. I barely noticed.

Winter came, a seemingly endless series of bleak days and frigid nights. It was the first time since I'd married Lisa that I didn't bring a Christmas tree home to decorate. There just didn't seem much sense to it. We'd never had any children, she wasn't there to share it, and I wasn't going to have any visitors.

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As it turned out, I was wrong about the visitor: I spotted him maybe an hour before midnight, wandering naked across my backyard during the worst blizzard of the season.

At first I thought I was hallucinating. Five inches of snow had fallen, and the wind chill was something like ten below zero. I stared in disbelief for a full minute, and when he didn't disappear, I put on my coat, climbed into my boots, grabbed a blanket, and rushed outside. When I reached him he seemed half frozen. I threw the blanket around him and led him back into the house.

I rubbed his arms and legs vigorously with a towel, then sat him down in the kitchen and poured him some hot coffee. It took him a few minutes to stop shivering, but finally he reached out for the cup. He warmed his hands on it, then lifted it and took a sip.

"Thank you," he whispered hoarsely.

Once I was sure he wasn't going to die, I stood back and took a look at him. He was actually pretty good-looking now that his color was returning. He might have been thirty, maybe a couple of years older. Lean body, dark hair, gray eyes. A couple of scars, but I couldn't tell what they were from, or how fresh they were. They could have been from one of the wars in Iraq, or old sports injuries, or perhaps just the wind whipping frozen bushes against him a few minutes ago.

"Are you feeling better?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes, I'll be all right soon."

"What the hell were you doing out there without any clothes on?"

"Trying to get home," he said with an ironic smile.

"I haven't seen you around," I said. "Do you live near here?"

"No."

"Is there someone who can pick you up and take you there?"

He seemed about to answer me, then changed his mind and just shook his head.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"John." He took another swallow from the cup and made a face.

"Yeah, I know," I said. "The coffee's pretty awful. Lisa made it better."

"Lisa?"

"My wife," I said. "She died last year."

We were both silent for a couple of minutes, and I noticed still more color returning to his face.

"Where did you leave your clothes?" I asked.

"They're very far away."

"Just how far did you walk in this blizzard?"

"I don't know."

"Okay," I said in exasperation. "Who do I call—the cops, the hospital, or the nearest asylum?"

"Don't call anyone," said John. "I'll be all right soon, and then I'll leave."

"Dressed like that? In this weather?"

He seemed surprised. "I'd forgotten. I guess I'll have to wait here until it's over. I'm sorry to impose, but . . ."

"What the hell," I said. "I've been alone a long time and I'm sure Lisa would say I could use a little company, even from a naked stranger. At

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any rate she wouldn't want me to throw you out in the cold on Christmas Eve." I stared at him. "I just hope you're not dangerous."

"Not to my friends."

"I figure pulling you out of the snow and giving you shelter qualifies as an act of friendship," I said. "Just what the hell were you doing out there, and what happened to your clothes?"

"It's a long story."

"It's a long night, and I've got nothing to do."

"All right," said John with a shrug. "I am a very old man; how old I do not know. Possibly I am a hundred, possibly more; but I can't tell because I have never aged as other men, nor do I remember any childhood."

"Stop," I said.

"What is it?"

"I don't know what game you're playing, but I've heard that before—a long, long time ago. I don't know where, but I've heard it."

He shook his head. "No you haven't. But perhaps you've *read* it before."

I searched through my memory, mentally scanning the bookshelves of my youth—and there I found it, right between *The Wizard of Oz* and *King Solomon's Mines*. "God, it's been close to half a century! I loved that book when I was growing up."

"Thank you," said John.

"What are you thanking me for?"

"I wrote it."

"Sure you did," I said. "I read the damned thing fifty years ago, and it was an old book *then*. Look at yourself in a mirror."

"Nevertheless."

Wonderful, I thought. *Just what I needed on Christmas Eve. Other people get carolers; I get you.* Aloud I said: "It wasn't written by a John. It was written by an Edgar."

"He *published* it. *I* wrote it."

"Sure," I said. "And your last name is Carter, right?"

"Yes, it is."

"I should have called the loony bin to begin with."

"They couldn't get here until morning," said John. "Trust me: you're perfectly safe."

"The assurances of a guy who walks around naked in a snowstorm and thinks he's John Carter of Mars aren't exactly coin of the realm," I said. The second I said it I kind of tensed and told myself I should be humoring him, that I was a sixty-four-year-old man with high blood pressure and worse cholesterol and he looked like a cruiserweight boxer. Then I realized that I didn't really care whether he killed me or not, that I'd just been going through the motions of living since Lisa had died, and I decided not to humor him after all. If he picked up a kitchen knife and ran me through, Warlord of Mars style, at least it would put an end to the aching loneliness that had been my constant companion for almost a year.

"So why do you think you're John Carter?" I asked him.

"Because I am."

"Why not Buck Rogers or Flash Gordon—or the Scarlet Pimpernel for that matter?"

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"Why aren't you Doc Savage or the Shadow?" he replied. "Or James Bond for that matter?"

"I never claimed to be a fictional character," I said.

"Neither did I. I am John Carter, formerly of Virginia, and I am trying to return to my princess."

"Stark naked in a blizzard?"

"My clothes do not survive the transition, and I am not responsible for the weather," he said.

"That's a reasonably rational explanation for a crazy man."

He stared at me. "The woman I love more than life itself is millions of miles from here. Is it so crazy to want to return to her?"

"No," I admitted. "It's not crazy to want to be with her. But it's crazy to think she's on Mars."

"Where do *you* think she is?" he asked.

"How the hell should *I* know?" I shot back. "But I know nothing's on Mars except a bunch of rocks. It's below zero in the summer, there's no oxygen, and if anything ever lived there, it died out fifty or sixty million years ago. What have you got to say to that?"

"I have spent close to a century on Barsoom. Perhaps it is some other world than the one you know as Mars. Perhaps when I traverse the void, I also traverse the eons. I'm not interested in explanations, only in results. As long as I can once again hold my incomparable princess in my arms, I'll leave the answers to the scientists and the philosophers."

"And the psychiatrists," I added.

He looked grimly amused. "So if you had your way, I would be locked away in an institution until they convinced me that the woman I love doesn't exist and that my entire life has been a meaningless fantasy. You strike me as a very unhappy man; would that make you happier?"

"I'm just a realistic man," I said. "When I was a kid, I wanted so badly to believe *A Princess of Mars* was true that I used to stand in my backyard every night and reach my hands out to Mars, just the way you did. I kept waiting to get whisked away from the mundane life I'd been living and transported to Barsoom." I paused. "It never happened. All I got from all that reaching was sore shoulders and a lot of teasing from friends who didn't read books."

"Perhaps you had no reason to go to Barsoom," he said. "You were a child, with your entire life ahead of you. I think that Barsoom can be very choosy about who it allows to visit."

"So now you're saying that a planet is sentient?"

"I have no idea if it is," replied John. "Do you know for an absolute fact that it isn't?"

I stared at him irritably. "You're better at this than I am," I said. "You sound so fucking reasonable. Of course, you've had a lot more practice."

"More practice at what?"

"Fooling people by sounding normal."

"More practice than you?"

"See?" I said. "That's what I mean. You've got an answer for everything, and if you don't, then you respond with a question that'll make *me* sound

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like a fool if I answer it. But *I* wasn't wandering around naked in a blizzard in the middle of the night, and I don't think I live on Mars."

"Do you feel better now?" he said.

"Not much," I admitted. "You want some more coffee?"

"Actually, what I'd like to do is walk around a little and get some life back in my limbs."

"Outside?"

He shook his head. "No, not outside."

"Fine," I said, getting up. "It's not as big or as stately as a Martian palace, but I'll give you the chef's tour."

He got to his feet, adjusted the blanket around himself, and fell into step behind me. I led him into the living room, then stopped.

"Are you still cold?"

"A little."

"I think I'll light a fire," I said. "I haven't used the damned fireplace all winter. I might as well get my money's worth."

"It's not necessary," he said. "I'll be all right."

"It's no bother," I said, opening the screen and tossing a couple of logs onto the grate. "Look around while I'm doing it."

"You're not afraid I might rob you?"

"Have you got any pockets to put your loot in?" I asked.

He smiled at that. "I guess it's my good luck that I'm not a thief."

I spent the next couple of minutes positioning the kindling and starting the fire. I don't know which rooms he'd seen, but he was just returning when I straightened up.

"You must have loved her very much," he said. "You've turned the house into a shrine to her."

"Whether you're John Carter or merely think you're John Carter, you should be able to understand what I felt."

"How long has she been gone?"

"She died last February," I said, then added bitterly: "On Valentine's Day."

"She was a lovely woman."

"Most people just get older," I said. "She got more beautiful every day. To me, anyway."

"I know."

"How could you know? You never met her, never saw her."

"I know because my princess grows more beautiful with every passing moment. When you are truly in love, your princess always grows more beautiful."

"And if she's Barsoomian, she stays young for a thousand years, give or take," I said, remembering the book.

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps? Don't you know?"

"Does it really make a difference, as long as she remains young and beautiful in my eyes?"

"That's pretty philosophical for a guy who thinks he makes his living lopping off heads with a longsword," I said.

"I want nothing more than to live in peace," he replied, sitting in the

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armchair that was closest to the fire. "I resent every second that I am away from my Dejah Thoris."

"I envy you," I said.

"I thought I was supposed to be insane," he said wryly.

"You are. It makes no difference. Whether your Dejah Thoris is real or whether she's a figment of a deranged mind, you believe she exists and that you're going to join her. My Lisa is dead; I'll never see her again."

He made no reply, but simply stared at me.

"You may be as crazy as a loon," I continued, seating myself on the sofa, "but you're convinced you're going to see your Princess of Mars. I'd give up every last vestige of sanity if I could believe, even for a minute, that I would see my Princess of Earth one more time."

"I admire your courage," said John.

"Courage?" I repeated, surprised.

"If *my* princess were to die, I would have no desire to live another day, even another moment, without her."

"It has nothing to do with a desire to live."

"Then what is it?"

I shrugged. "Instinct. Inertia. I don't know. I certainly haven't enjoyed being alive the past year."

"And yet you have not ended it."

"Maybe it's not courage at all," I said. "Maybe it's cowardice."

"Or maybe there is a reason."

"For living? I can't give you one."

"Then perhaps it was Fate that I should appear at your house."

"You didn't magically appear," I said. "You walked here from wherever it was you left your clothes."

"No," he said, shaking his head firmly. "One moment I was strolling through the gardens of my palace in Helium, hand in hand with my princess, and the next I was standing in your yard, without my harness or my weapons. I tried to return, but I couldn't see Barsoom through the swirling snow, and if I can't see it I can't reach out to it."

"You've got a smooth answer for everything," I said wearily. "I'll bet you ace all your Rorschach tests, too."

"You know all your neighbors," said John. "Have you ever seen me before? How far do you think a naked man could get in this blizzard? Have the police come by to warn you of an escaped madman?"

"It's a terrible night to be out, even for the police, and you seem like a harmless enough madman," I replied.

"Now who has the smooth answer?"

"Okay, fine—you're John Carter, and Dejah Thoris is up there somewhere waiting for you, and it was Fate that brought you here, and tomorrow morning a very worried man won't show up looking for his missing cousin or brother."

"You have my books," he said. "Some of them anyway. I saw them on a shelf in your study. Use them. Ask me anything you want."

"What would that prove? There's probably a thousand kids who can recite them word for word."

"Then I guess we'll spend the night in silence."

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"No," I said. "I'll ask you some questions—but the answers won't be in the books."

"Fine."

"All right," I said. "How can you be so smitten with a woman who was hatched from an egg?"

"How can you love a woman of Irish or Polish or Brazilian descent?" he asked. "How can you love a black woman, or a red one, or a white one? How can you love a Christian or a Jew? I love my princess because of what she is, not what she might have been." He paused. "Why are you smiling?"

"I was thinking that we're growing a perceptive crop of madmen this year."

He gestured to one of Lisa's photos. "I take it she had nothing in common with you."

"She had everything in common with me," I said. "Except heritage and religion and upbringing. Odd, isn't it?"

"Why should it be?" he asked. "I never thought it was odd to love a Martian woman."

"I suppose if you can believe there are people on Mars, even people who have hatched from eggs, it's easy enough to believe you love one of them."

"Why do you feel it's so insane to believe in a better world, a world of grace and chivalry, of manners and nobility? And why should I not love the most perfect woman that world has to offer? Would it not be mad to feel otherwise? Once you met your princess, would it have been rational to cast her aside?"

"We're not talking about my princess," I said irritably.

"We are talking about love."

"Lots of people fall in love. No one else has had to go to Mars because of it."

"And now we are talking about the sacrifices one makes for love." He smiled ruefully. "For example, here I am, in the middle of the night, forty million miles from my princess, with a man who thinks I belong in an asylum."

"Why did you come back from Mars, then?" I asked.

"It was not an act of volition." He paused, as if remembering. "The first time it happened, I thought the Almighty must be testing me as He had tested Job. I spent ten long years here before I could return."

"And you never once questioned if it had really happened?"

"The ancient cities, the dead sea bottoms, the battles, the fierce green-skinned warriors, I could have imagined them. But I could never have imagined my love for my princess; it remained with me every minute of every day—the sound of her voice, the feel of her skin, the scent of her hair. No, I could not have invented that."

"It must have been a comfort during your exile," I said.

"A comfort and a torture," he replied. "To look up in the sky every day and know that she and the son I had never seen were so unthinkably far away."

"But you never doubted?"

"Never," he said. "I still remember the last words I wrote: 'I believe that they are waiting for me, and something tells me I shall soon know.'"

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"True or not, at least you could believe it," I said. "You didn't watch your princess die in front of you."

He stared at me, as if trying to decide what to say next. Finally he spoke. "I have died many times, and if Providence wills it, I shall die again tomorrow."

"What are you talking about?"

"Only my consciousness can traverse the void between worlds," he said. "My body remains behind, a lifeless hulk."

"And it doesn't decay or rot, it just waits for you to return?" I said sarcastically.

"I can't explain it," he said. "I can only take advantage of it."

"And this is supposed to comfort me—that a madman who thinks he's John Carter is hinting that my Lisa might somehow be alive on Mars?"

"It would comfort *me*," he said.

"Yeah, but you're crazy."

"Is it crazy to think she might have done what I did?"

"Absolutely," I said.

"If you had a terminal disease, would it be crazy to seek out every quack in the world who thought he could cure it rather than to sit around passively waiting to die?"

"So now you're a quack instead of a madman?"

"No," he said. "I'm just a man who is less afraid of death than of losing his princess."

"Bully for you," I said. "I've already lost mine."

"For ten months. I lost mine for ten years."

"There's a difference," I pointed out. "Mine's dead; yours wasn't."

"There's another difference," he replied. "I had the courage to find mine."

"Mine isn't lost. I know exactly where she is."

He shook his head. "You know where the unimportant part of her is."

I sighed deeply. "I'd settle for your madness if I had your faith."

"You don't need faith. You only need the courage to believe, not that something is true, but that it is possible."

"Courage is for Warlords," I replied, "not for sixty-four-year-old widowers."

"Every man has untapped wells of courage," he said. "Maybe your princess is not on Barsoom. Maybe there is no Barsoom, and I am every bit as crazy as you think I am. Are you really content to accept things as they are, or have you the courage to hope that I'm right?"

"Of course I hope you're right," I said irritably. "So what?"

"Hope leads to belief, and belief leads to action."

"It leads to the funny farm."

He looked at me, a sad expression on his face. "Was your princess perfect?"

"In every way," I said promptly.

"And did she love you?"

I saw his next question coming, but I couldn't help answering him. "Yes."

"Could a perfect princess have loved a coward or a madman?" he said.

"Enough!" I snapped. "It's been hard enough staying sane these last ten months. Then you come along and make the alternative sound too attrac-

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tive. I can't spend the rest of my life thinking that I'll somehow find a way to see her again!"

"Why not?"

At first I thought he was kidding. Then I saw that he wasn't.

"Aside from the fact that it's crazy, if I bought into it I wouldn't accomplish a damned thing."

"What are you accomplishing now?" he asked.

"Nothing," I admitted, suddenly deflated. "I get up each morning and all I do is wait for the day to drag to a close so I can go to sleep and not see her face in front of me until I wake up again."

"And you consider this the rational behavior of a sane man?"

"Of a realistic man," I replied. "She's gone and she's not coming back."

"Reality is greatly overrated," he responded. "A realist sees silicon; a madman sees a machine that can think. A realist sees bread mold; a madman sees a drug that miraculously cures infection. A realist looks at the stars and asks, why bother? A madman looks at those same stars and asks, why not bother?" He paused and stared intently at me. "A realist would say, my princess is dead. A madman would say, John Carter found a way to overcome death, so why couldn't she?"

"I wish I could say that."

"But?" he said.

"I'm not a madman."

"I feel very sorry for you."

"I don't feel sorry for *you*," I replied.

"Oh? What do you feel?"

"Envy," I said. "They'll come by tonight or tomorrow or the next day to pick you up and take you back to wherever you wandered off from, and you will believe just as devoutly then as you do now. You'll know beyond any doubt that your princess is waiting for you. You'll spend your every waking moment trying to escape, trying to get back to Barsoom. You'll have belief and hope and purpose, which is a pretty impressive triumvirate. I wish I had any one of them."

"They're not unattainable."

"Maybe not to Warlords, but they are to aging widowers with bad knees and worse blood pressure," I said, getting to my feet. He looked at me curiously. "I've had enough craziness for one night," I told him. "I'm going to bed. You can sleep on the sofa if you want, but if I were you I'd leave before they came looking for me. If you go to the basement you'll find some clothes and an old pair of boots you can have, and you can take my coat from the hall closet."

"Thank you for your hospitality," he said as I walked to the staircase. "I'm sorry to have brought back painful memories of your princess."

"I cherish my memories," I replied. "Only the present is painful."

I climbed the stairs and lay down on the bed, still dressed, and fell asleep to visions of Lisa alive and smiling, as I did every night.

When I awoke in the morning and went downstairs he was gone. At first I thought he'd taken my advice and gotten a head start on his keepers—but then I looked out the window and saw him, right where I'd spotted him the night before.

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He was face-down in the snow, his arms stretched out in front of him, naked as the day he was born. I knew before I checked for a pulse that he was dead. I wish I could say that he had a happy smile on his face, but he didn't; he looked as cold and uncomfortable as when I'd first found him.

I called the police, who showed up within the hour and took him away. They told me they had no reports of any nutcases escaping from the local asylum.

I checked in with them a few times in the next week. They simply couldn't identify him. His fingerprints and DNA weren't on file anywhere, and he didn't match any missing persons descriptions. I'm not sure when they closed the file on him, but nobody showed up to claim the body and they finally planted him, with no name on his headstone, in the same cemetery where Lisa was buried.

I visited Lisa every day, as usual, and I started visiting John's grave as well. I don't know why. He'd gotten me thinking crazy, uncomfortable thoughts that I couldn't shake, blurring the line between wishes and possibilities, and I resented it. More to the point, I resented *him:* he died with the absolute knowledge that he would soon see his princess, while I lived with the absolute knowledge that I would never again see mine.

I couldn't help wondering which of us was truly the sane one—the one who made reality conform by the sheer force of his belief, or the one who settled for old memories because he lacked the courage to try to create new ones.

As the days passed I found myself dwelling more and more on what John had said, turning it over in my mind again and again—and then, on February 13, I read an item in the newspaper that tomorrow Mars would be closer to Earth than at any time in the next sixteen years.

I turned my computer on for the first time in months and verified the item on a couple of internet news services. I thought about it for awhile, and about John, and about Lisa. Then I phoned the Salvation Army and left a message on their answering device, giving them my address and telling them that I would leave the house unlocked and they were welcome to everything in it— clothes, food, furniture, anything they wanted.

I've spent the past three hours writing these words, so that whoever reads them will know that what I am about to do I am doing willingly, even joyfully, and that far from giving in to depression I am, at long last, yielding to hope.

It's almost three in the morning. The snow stopped falling at midnight, the sky is clear, and Mars should come into view at any moment now. A few minutes ago I gathered my favorite photos of Lisa; they're lined up on the desk right beside me, and she seems more beautiful than ever.

Very soon I'll take off my clothes, fold them neatly on my desk chair, and walk out into the yard. Then it's just a matter of spotting what I'm looking for. Is it Mars? Barsoom? Something else? It makes no difference. Only a realist sees things as they are, and it was John who showed me the limitations of reality—and how could someone as perfect as my princess not transcend those limitations?

I believe she is waiting for me, and something tells me I shall soon know. O

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BEING WITH JIMMY

Aaron Schutz

We published our first and only other story by Aaron Schutz, "Small," exactly fifteen years ago in our December 1989 issue. The author began submitting stories to *Asimov's* while attending middle school. Growing up in Eugene, Oregon, he took part in writers' workshops at the home of Kate Wilhelm and Damon Knight. Although that's where he believes he really learned how to write, he later received a master's degree in creative writing from New York University. For a few years, life got in the way of further fiction writing plans. Now that he's achieved tenure at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, however, he's once again found the time to write short stories.

A word of warning: there are brief scenes in the following story that may be disturbing to some readers.

Every once in a while, as he puttered about the cabin or while we weeded in our ragged little garden, memories of the day Jimmy arrived bloomed in Alphie's mind. At these times, we both paused for a moment, caught up in the brilliant colors and feelings of the past as it spilled its painful fragments into our present.

A hermit on our lake island for many years, it had never occurred to Alphie that his isolation would ever end. And this was not really a problem. Before they found him, he had lived most of his life away from other people—he could not stomach their feelings, and they could not stomach his. But one morning, the radio called him to the beach for an unexpected delivery.

That summer day was calm and quiet as he walked through the forest. But as he neared the beach, phantom objects began to brush against him, unfamiliar images flickering across his field of vision. Alphie stopped. He was no longer alone. *Damn,* he thought, *I don't need this.*

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But someone heard him, and yelled back, *Goaway!*

Almost, Alphie turned back. In the days to come, he would often wish that he had. But then he sighed and began walking again. Waves of rage, images and sensations, washed through him like gusts of rain as he came nearer, repeatedly causing him to stumble before he found himself again. *This guy's gotta learn some control!* Alphie thought, disgustedly. Finally, he came out of the trees onto the beach. Jimmy stood there, watching him defiantly: A skinny kid about twelve years old in a T-shirt and shorts, his arms tightly crossed across his chest.

As Alphie came closer, brief flashes of the kid's memories lanced through him. He momentarily

found himself crying in a dark closet;

cringed as a woman slapped him, laughing as she felt his pain on her own skin;

lay overwhelmed in a pile of naked caressing bodies, drinking up their sensations and pouring them back through them all.

Alphie shook his head. *You were somebody's playtoy, kid.*

At the same time, Alphie watched himself through Jimmy's eyes as he approached. For the first time in years, he saw his own wrinkled face. *I'm old*, he thought, surprised.

Hey, kid, Alphie said. *It's okay, I won't hurt you.* He reached slowly out to grasp Jimmy's shoulder, but yanked it quickly back as Jimmy viciously clawed out, leaving bleeding scratches in his arm.

Don'ttouchme! the kid yelled, *g'damnpervert.* He didn't even flinch with Alphie's pain.

Alphie stopped for a moment, caught up in the kid's rage. Then he shrugged, resigned. *You ain't got nobody else, kid,* Alphie sent. *Where else are they going to take you?*

Gettingout'ahere, the kid said firmly, turning away from Alphie and scraping his feet in the sand as he walked along the edge of the water. *Freakyoldfuck. Stay'wayfrom me. Nobody keepin'mehere.*

Yeah? Alphie said. *Good luck.*

Looking away from Jimmy, he gazed out over the calm water of the lake. Opening himself to the space for the briefest moment, he brushed against a watcher on one of the patrol boats that circled the island day and night, and saw himself standing on the beach through the man's binoculars. He waved. *Thanks for nothing,* he sent, and felt the man recoil in panic before Alphie lost him, returning to himself on the beach. Alphie laughed bitterly. He shook his head, and walked slowly back to the cabin, the seething anger that was Jimmy slowly falling away, but never quite disappearing.

Maybe Jimmy sensed something that night. I don't know. Or maybe it was just the moon keeping him awake—so bright it crept through every chink in the cabin, scattering stars across the walls and floor. Whatever the reason, Jimmy lay awake for a long time, watching dust motes floating in moonlight rays, listening to the scritchyscratch of some critter moving under the floor, his mind rushing back and forth across the years. I couldn't sleep with all that, light trickling into me through his eyes.

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Finally, Jimmy pushed up off his cot and began pulling on his clothes.

Hey, I said softly, *I'm going too.*

We watched Alphie as we tiptoed out, but he could sleep through almost anything. Slackjawed snoring, he turned and muttered on his cot. Wrinkled old bag of skin, he was lost to the world till morning dragged him, grunting, to the coffee grinder.

Outside, we tumbled down weather-cracked stairs into our moon-glowed yard. And tried to be quiet. But Jimmy, he started spinning round and round, arms stretched out. *Stop it!* I told him, but he just kept going faster and faster till centrifugal fog tipped us both, laughing, to the hard-dirt and grass. *God damn it, you knucklebones*! I yelled. But Alphie didn't wake. And soon both of us lay happy on the ground that smelled of dust and pine pitch, little sticks and rocks poking us all over, watching the tall trees around us sway in the breeze.

After a while, his gaze spun away from the sky. I wasn't really paying attention till a grittycrunchyloamy taste filled my mouth. First, I thought it was me, poking my tongue around my teeth. But then I looked over and saw him smiling, mud dribbling from his mouth.

Was gonna get him good. But when he saw I was seeing him, he knew the jig was up. He jumped up quick as a rabbit, too far away to smack as I grabbed over. He took off in his stumbledrag run, spittin' dirt all over and cackling like a thief.

Where ya going? I asked, scrambling after. But he didn't answer, pulling ahead. But I got a sense of the lakeside, so I knew anyway.

Alphie didn't know what to do with Jimmy. He wasn't used to dealing with anybody, especially not a kid. His own childhood was a long time ago—and though it wasn't as bad as Jimmy's, it wasn't much to write home about. So he figured he wouldn't do anything. That night, though, he made some extra dinner and left it on a stump out in the yard. The next day, it was gone. Maybe animals, but Alphie figured Jimmy probably came while he slept. And that's how it went for a while.

In the days that followed, Alphie often felt the foggy edges of Jimmy as he worked around the cabin. Occasionally, he felt:

pine needles prickling his feet as Jimmy walked, or

the weight of a sharp rock in his hands as Jimmy pounded on a tree, or he found himself

heaving a stone dejectedly into the lake, before flickering back to himself.

And he knew that the same happened to Jimmy. A continuous vibration of the kid's rage waxed and waned through Alphie as Jimmy wandered the island, moving closer and farther away. Sometimes, Alphie found himself angry at a bent nail or a dried-out tomato plant, and he had to stop and remember that it wasn't him, it was Jimmy.

Fact was, the whole thing pissed Alphie off. He didn't want any kid, especially not this one. And he knew that Jimmy knew how he felt. And that made Alphie feel bad. Because, at other times, he found himself *worrying* about the stupid kid. So, over the next few weeks, Alphie and Jimmy came to know each other in spite of themselves. Neither could really hide from the other.

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* * *

I knew I shouldn't follow Jimmy that night. He was in one of his funks, and they could get bad. But I was never really scared of him, no matter how crazy he got. He wasn't mad at me, after all. And he could be a lot of fun when he went on a tear. Anyway, I was bored and awake, and Alphie wasn't there to say otherwise. What else was there to do? So I ran after.

Chasing him that night was tough, slapping through treelimbs and brush, stumbling over roots and rough ground. Usually I don't have much trouble telling us apart, but that night, I kept mixing us up. Finally, he dodged around a tree, and I went with him smack into another. It hurt like hell. And I decided I'd just sit and wait till he got farther ahead.

It felt strange as Jimmy got fainter and fainter, till it was mostly just me there, alone in my own skin. This didn't happen much, even with only the three of us. Jimmy was probably used to it—he was always off by himself exploring. I always wanted to come with him, but he didn't like me tagging along, and Alphie didn't quite trust him anyway. So I usually stuck close to Alphie. Anyway, I liked following Alphie's thinking around and around as he dug in the garden or puttered in the cabin, filling me with pictures and sounds of stuff I'd never seen myself, like cars and cotton candy and flush toilets and television.

The world was a very different place alone. Flatter, somehow. It's hard to explain. The thing is, when one person looks at something—say, a rock—they see it in their own way. Like I see a rock as hard, and Jimmy sees a rock as something to hurt somebody with, and Alphie sees the rock, and it reminds him of his old garden border in Texas. And the rock is *all* of these things. The real world is like that, a jumble of all the ways different people see it.

When we were together and everybody was moving around, the world could get pretty fuzzy at times, sure. But it was all right if you didn't think about it. Most of the time, all three of us were just hanging out, probably like anybody (though, how would *I* know?)—except that you had to keep track of who was you and who wasn't, or you'd end up smacking a tree, like I had following Jimmy.

Anyway, sitting there all alone made me sad, and a little scared, so I scrambled up quick to get back with Jimmy.

A week or so after Jimmy arrived, the clear summer days ended, as they will sometimes, in a massive rainstorm. Torrents of water drenched everything in sight.

That afternoon, as the rain fell harder and harder, Alphie felt Jimmy coming through the trees toward him as he sat quietly on his bench on the deck. Soon, although he couldn't see Jimmy, he could see himself as Jimmy peered at him through the trees. Though dry himself, Alphie shivered with Jimmy as the kid crouched cold and drenched in the mud, radiating defiance and fear, but much calmer than before. After a while, Alphie got up slowly and got a blanket and a towel out of the cabin. Laying them on the bench outside, he walked to the other side of the deck and stood still, both hands on the railing, gazing into the wet forest away from Jimmy. After a long time, he felt the kid creeping forward. Alphie turned

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his attention away from Jimmy's intentions, losing himself in the sensations of their two bodies, the pungent scents of damp pine and loam through their nostrils, the sharp distinction between his dry and Jimmy's slick skin, the rough splintery wood beneath his palms and the slap of uncut wet grass on Jimmy's bare legs as he came through the front yard.

Finally, he felt Jimmy rubbing himself dry with the towel at the edge of the deck, tense like a bird ready to fly. Jimmy's eyes did not leave Alphie's back for a moment as he wrapped himself carefully in the blanket. After a while, Alphie slowly turned around. They gazed at each other and at themselves through each other's eyes. Jimmy bared his teeth and Alphie felt his jaw clench hard with the kid's. *Gonnahurtyou,* the boy declared, edging toward the stairs but still unwilling to go back out in the rain. *Stay'way.*

Alphie shook his head, still shivering a little with Jimmy's cold. *You are a pain in the ass*, Alphie said.

Fuckyouasshole, Jimmy shot back. Each felt the other's anger. Struck by the absurdity of it all, Alphie cracked a smile. Then, in spite of himself, for the smallest moment, Jimmy did too. *Justfuckoff*, Jimmy said, embarrassed, looking away. In spite of himself, Alphie laughed. Then he walked inside the cabin, leaving Jimmy alone on the deck.

The rain fell for the next few hours or so. Jimmy stayed on the deck, curled up in the blanket and Alphie sat quietly on his cot in the dark cabin. As the hours passed, they fell through each other's thoughts. When the rain finally stopped, Jimmy crept back into the forest, gripping his new blanket tightly. It was a while before Jimmy and Alphie met face to face again. But something had changed between them.

As I came closer to the beach behind Jimmy that night, I started feeling something wrong. Sometimes I felt sand underneath Jimmy's feet, but sometimes it felt like he was wearing shoes, which I knew he wasn't. And before I got there, I could see out over the lake through Jimmy's eyes, rippling and glinting with shards of moonlight. But I could *also* see Jimmy and the forest dark behind him, through somebody *else's* eyes.

We weren't alone.

Who's there? I asked as I came out of the trees. I got nothing but a funny string of images and a funny-feeling body crouched . . . somewhere. Somebody curious, looking at us like I sometimes looked at frogs and crickets and things, especially when I took them apart to see how they worked (Alphie didn't like it when I did that).

It's a girl, Jimmy said, and then, *Whatin Hell she doing here?* I'd never seen a girl, except in Jimmy and Alphie's memories. I was kind of excited, but Jimmy, he was getting mad. *Ain't supposed to be here, are ya girl?* he taunted. *Come to see the monsters? What ya think?*

And I suddenly felt ashamed, 'cause I saw us through her eyes: dirty and scraggly hair and torn shorts, and I could *smell* us, like I hadn't before. But now she was scared, too, because she was in us just like we was in her, and she didn't know what to do.

Not so fun, huh, sweetie? Jimmy sneered. He reached into his pants and squeezed his thing. *How ya like that?* And she was on the ground, now, arms around her head, making funny sounds that felt like *Go way* and *stopitsto-*

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pitstopit but seemed like she didn't really know how to speak. Still, Jimmy and me couldn't see her. I felt like I ought to do something for her, but I didn't know what, 'cause I knew it was us being there that was the problem.

Jimmy giggled, high and short, and started moving in a wide circle across the beach. *Go to the zoo, ya stay out the bear cage!* Jimmy shouted. *Now ya in it!* She started looking around, then, hand scrabbling for a rock as she turned to run away. But she stumbled and fell down again, 'cause she couldn't tell whose feet she'd got.

Walking slow, Jimmy was trying to figure out where she was, where she was looking from. *To your left,* Jimmy said, and I realized that he was right, she was down next to a boulder about thirty feet from the water, crying and trying to get up. I still couldn't see her, but I could see the boulder from the corner of her eye. Then Jimmy ran up to an empty patch of sand and reached over and pulled on something. Some kind of backpack thing tore away from nothing, and then, suddenly, she shimmered into sight, a small person covered all over in a funny kind of skin-suit that was fading from sand/boulder color to a light grey.

She turned and took a swipe at Jimmy with her rock, but he'd stepped back, and she only succeeded in throwing herself back down into the sand. She was making all kinds of sounds, and I suddenly realized that she was *talking,* which I'd only heard a few times from Alphie when the watchers called us on the radio. But she didn't know how to *speak*, so all I got was a mess of images and feelings.

As the weather on the island grew colder, Jimmy began sleeping out on the deck, and then in the cabin with Alphie on a new cot Alphie had asked them to bring. Still skittish, Jimmy kept his distance from Alphie, though sometimes he would hang around and watch as Alphie worked or read his books. They came to a truce, I guess, and maybe they would have stayed that way. Except that a few years later, *I* came along.

I don't remember anything about that time myself—I was too young, maybe two or three years old. But, in their memories, I've seen this little kid stumbling around on the beach next to a few boxes of diapers. *I ain't touching no fucking diapers*, was the first thing Jimmy said. Alphie was too disgusted to say anything. They could have left me there. Eventually, I bet the watchers would have come to take me back. But after walking around and swearing for a while, Alphie and Jimmy took me home.

And Jimmy *did* change my diapers. He slowly started taking more and more care of me. He even sang me dumb little songs he made up. And he and Alphie grew closer (though not that close).

These days, the three of us mostly get along, I suppose. Jimmy, he's always irritated at me and Alphie; he's always mad at something or someone, always stomping off into the forest in disgust. But we know how he feels deep down, and he knows that we know. It's just like that with us. Sometimes he even lets me come along with him, showing me stuff he's figured out, like how to weave a lean-to in the forest from branches, or how to lure a squirrel close by staying quiet with bread in one hand and a rock in the other.

Standing over the girl, Jimmy was spinning farther into his crazy

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space. I'd never seen him quite like this, and it scared me. But I was still kind of excited, too.

Then sirens moaned from across the lake. I'd only heard them a couple of times before. The watchers must have seen the girl the same time we did. Maybe Jimmy was right, she wasn't supposed to be there—we never found out for sure. Helicopter lights rose into the sky from the other side of the lake, pounding the air with their thump-thump-thump, heading toward us, but staying too high for us to sense.

Jimmy wasn't paying any attention to this. He only cared about the girl. It was hard to keep track of myself with both of them freaking out. The girl was totally limp, shaking with Jimmy's rage and her own scaredness and my confusion.

You wanna see the zoo animals? he asked. He crouched down and slapped her, hard. Her pain dropped me to my knees, and she cried out, but Jimmy just laughed. Then he grabbed hold of her skin-suit and started tearing it away, stopping every once in a while to feel her or slap her. Under her cap, her head was bald, and that made her seem more naked than anything else. Then her breasts tumbled out of her suit, small and soft like I remembered through Alphie and Jimmy. Jimmy grabbed one and squeezed it, and all three of us screamed, Jimmy howling in joy in the pain. And I saw him through her, and her through him, and them through me, and we were all mixed up in this nightmare with Jimmy who was gone, just gone.

Oh, stop, Jimmy, stop, please stop, I said, and I crawled toward them through the pain. Jimmy pulled out his thing, standing over her and stroking it. I'd felt him do this lots of times before, and it'd always made me feel good. But this time, the girl was vomiting and it was bad, very bad. And the girl started screaming, flailing out with her fists and banging her head against the sand.

Over the years, Jimmy had learned from Alphie how to keep his memories mostly locked away during the day. But he can't stop the nightmares when he sleeps. After I came, he and Alphie agreed that he'd sleep someplace else when he felt them coming on. They both wanted to protect me. But he doesn't always know when it's gonna happen.

So, every once in a while, I wake shaking and sweating, still in that place with Jimmy where people are burning him and touching him and touching each other, feeling everything through him. The first time, it scared me so badly that I wouldn't sleep anywhere near Jimmy for weeks. For a while, I was afraid to be around him at all, and I know that hurt him. But I've learned to deal with it when I have to. I'm older now. Anyway, Alphie says it just comes with the territory, being like we are. *It is what it is*, he often says.

Those nights when Jimmy loses it, we have to wake him up so we can sleep. Usually Alphie does it, 'cause you never know what Jimmy will do. Like the time Alphie accidentally touched him (you never touch Jimmy) and Jimmy came out of sleep bellowing like a bear. He punched Alphie so hard he broke one of Alphie's ribs. All of us shuffled around in the pain from it for the next week or so.

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And Jimmy never even felt sorry about it. That's how he is.

Suddenly, there was somebody new with us: angry and intense, hands and feet working levers and pedals, strapped into some kind of chair. The whole beach lit up with her spotlight, and I saw the three of us below her through the glass between her feet as she descended, the blades of her copter thumping a tremendous heartbeat through all of our bodies. I looked up and saw her big black machine through my and Jimmy's eyes, sand and rock blowing up around us in a gritty cloud. I could hardly move with all four of us there at the same time, but somehow this lady in the helicopter was keeping it together. And I thought, maybe she's gonna do it, maybe she's gonna get the girl away from Jimmy. And I tried to tell the girl, but she couldn't *hear*.

But Jimmy started laughing again. I saw what he was gonna do, but couldn't stop him. He leaned over and smashed the back of his hand as hard as he could into the boulder. The pain flamed out through all of us. That was too much for the lady in the copter. She screamed and lost hold of a lever, shaking her hand in sympathetic agony. The air pressed down on us like a hand as the big machine slid sideways over us. I turned away. But I couldn't help but see the water rushing up toward the lady pilot as she panicked and tried to save herself. And through Jimmy's gleeful eyes, I watched the copter flutter, dip, spin, and then smash into the lake, the rotor blades slicing the water into whitecaps before splitting apart and flying in every direction. I felt a sharp pain in my chest as I lost all sense of the pilot. Then the machine flipped over and began settling into the lake.

As I grew up, I always thought that Jimmy was the coolest. Oh, sure, I loved Alphie, too. But Alphie was slow and steady, his mind like a cool fall day. Jimmy was *exciting*. Sometimes, especially when he was working on one of his schemes to get off the island, his thoughts whipped through him like skimming stones. It got all three of us agitated. Alphie always told him to *get away from here* when he was like that. *Come back when you've calmed down,* Alphie'd say.

When Jimmy let me come with him, I'd help him with his projects: sewing swimming bladders from deer skin or tying together a small raft with twine. Of course, they never worked. Every time he tried to get away, the watchers turned him back. I never really understood why he wanted to get off, or where he wanted to *go,* and this always irritated him, though he tried to ignore it. The one time I actually asked him, he got mad and started yelling and sent me away. Truth was, I liked it there on the island. I'd never been anywhere else, and the outside world didn't seem that good for people like us, at least as I saw it through Jimmy and Alphie's memories.

When I was younger, Jimmy got me mixed up in one of his nastier schemes. He had me light a big pile of brush on one side of the island while he slipped into the water on the other. I didn't know any better, and a little piece of the forest caught fire until the watchers dumped water on it from a plane (that was cool—I saw it). They found Jimmy anyway. Alphie was madder than I'd ever seen him that night. He kicked us both out of the cabin for a week.

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Anyway, I knew Jimmy was a little crazy, but until that night on the beach, I didn't really understand. I wish I still didn't. Maybe this is what it means to be grown up.

After the copter crashed, I think I kind of lost it. After a while, somebody started shaking me, and I suddenly saw myself, sprawled on the sand, through Alphie's eyes. The girl was curled up in a ball, still sobbing, and Jimmy was squatting quietly a little ways from her, just staring out into the wreckage that still floated on the water.

Let's get out of here, Alphie said, glancing over at the girl, feeling her but not going any closer. He shook his head. *Let them take care of their own.* He helped me up and went over to Jimmy, who, surprisingly, came quietly with him.

We walked slowly back to the cabin, not saying much. I could hear another helicopter coming down behind us after we moved away. The sirens kept whoop whooping into the night for a while, then shut down. Jimmy felt mostly empty, like he'd pulled back deep somewhere into himself, just watching the track before his feet. Alphie was flashing all kinds of different feelings and images, angry, sad, frustrated. Still, it felt good to be back together again. I felt Alphie's hand in mine and how mine felt in his, and his arthritis ached familiarly through my knees and back as we walked, soothing me.

Jimmy didn't say anything when we got back. Alphie watched angrily as he slipped away from us into the forest without a glance. For a while, after, Alphie and me just sat quiet together on the bench on our deck, staring out into our shadowlit yard, our feelings spilling into each other.

Then, finally, Alphie asked me what happened, and I remembered it for him. And we were quiet again for a while.

Is Jimmy a bad person? I finally asked, confused. I could feel Alphie struggling with what to say as different answers welled up in him.

Yes, he finally said, *sometimes I guess he is.*

Are they gonna come take him from us? I asked, scared for Jimmy.

Alphie grimaced. *I don't think so, kiddo,* he said. *You don't kill the bear if a tourist climbs into his cage.*

I thought about this for a while, and then said, *It's not really his fault, is it?*

What? he asked. He turned to face me, and I saw my own dirty face through his eyes. *You can always choose,* he said. *Don't ever forget that.*

But they broke him, I insisted. *That's not his fault.*

Alphie didn't know exactly what to say to that. After a while, almost to himself, he asked: *What do you do with somebody like that?*

I thought some more. *Maybe all we can do is love him,* I said.

Alphie was silent for a long time, and I dived with him through memories of his old life, and Jimmy's nightmares, and the scared girl, and the pieces of the big machine on the water, and the skinny scared kid they'd left on the beach so many years ago. He didn't say anything else. After a while, as we sat there, the sun slowly lit up the eastern sky. Away on the other side of the island, both of us could just barely sense Jimmy, angry and sad, perched on a rock at the edge of the water, also watching the rising sun. Though apart, the three of us sat together, always. ○

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POCKET POLTERGEIST

Pocket poltergeists are small,
Not up to the really serious mischief–
No breaking all the good china
No toppling shelves of hardback books on heads

No, their worst is throwing out the keys
Especially when you're stepping over sewer grates
Or out of elevators.

Pocket poltergeists wad up the Kleenex.
They open leaks in ballpoint pens
And felt-tips.
They unpin safety pins.

That unexpected spot of cozy warmth
On your hip or at your heart
When the windchill goes subzero
Is your pocket poltergeist
Delighting in your company
And getting ready to throw the keys away again.

–Ruth Berman

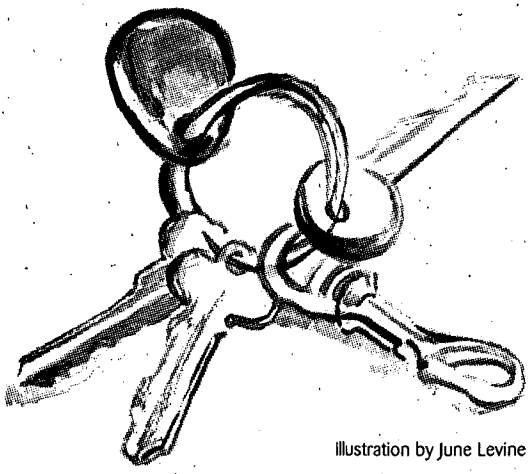

Illustration by June Levine

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RED HANDS, BLACK HANDS

Chris Roberson

Chris Roberson's short fiction has appeared in the anthology *The Many Faces of Van Helsing* (Ace, 2004), and in the pages of *Argosy, Black October, Fantastic Metropolis, Revolutionsf, Twilight Tales,* and *Electric Velocipede.* His first story for us is part of an alternate history sequence. A collection of these stories, *The Celestial Empire: Fire Star,* is due out late next year. Having released four novels through a POD small press, Mr. Roberson's first wide-release novel will be *Here, There & Everywhere* (Pyr, 2005). The author and his business partner and spouse, Allison Baker, are the publishers of MonkeyBrain Books, an imprint specializing in nonfiction genre studies. Releases include works by Michael Moorcock, Alan Moore, China Miéville, Jeff VanderMeer, and Paul Di Filippo. They are also the proud parents of Georgia Rose Roberson. The family resides in Austin, Texas.

Song Huagu stood beneath the hanging cages of jeweled scarabs and giant centipedes, her eyes on the mysterious newcomer at the far side of the atrium. Their hostess, Madam Jade, had a mania for inviting foreigners, wandering mendicants, touring entertainers, and diplomats to her little gatherings, so it came as no surprise to Song that she'd not seen him before. Still and all, there was a certain intensity to the rugged man that set him apart from the usual gang of effetes and dilettantes that frequented Madam Jade's salon.

It was the first night of the Spring Lantern Festival, and the city of Fuchuan was festooned with chains of lights. From Madam Jade's high

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windows, Song could see the twinklings in the streets below, newfound constellations to mirror those in the night sky. But if the stars above held in their orbits the fates of men—the movements of the Weaving Woman, and the Purple Luminous, and the twin stars of the Southern Gate governing the destinies of mortals—then what might these new configurations of brief lights below portend? That cluster of yellow lantern lights near the Red Flower District, suggesting two circles and a line? Song named it the Velocipede, and gave to it providence over the fates of merchants who bilked their customers. That string of green flickerings near the Governor's Palace, it became the Ladder, and ruled over the dim futures of girls from humble beginnings who desired some better life than society had in store for them.

But supposing that these terrestrial constellations did have some influence over the lives of the city's inhabitants, Song mused, her fancy taken to extremes, then did not men have the power to change their own destinies, merely by rearranging configurations of lanterns?

There was a story in this somewhere, Song Huagu decided. She'd find a place for it. Perhaps in the little piece she was scripting for the Imperial Fuchuan Opera.

Song's gaze drifted back to the stranger at the far side of the room. The skin around his eyes and mouth was pale in comparison to his sun-darkened cheeks and forehead, suggestive of someone who had spent some considerable time outside the confines of the Tianfei Valley, out on the high plains of the red planet's surface, where the air was thin and unsatisfying, and where breather-masks and goggles were still a necessity. The Council of Deliberative Officials had released a report late the previous year, which stated that the planet Huo Hsing was within four generations of producing sufficient levels of oxygen and nitrogen that breathers would no longer be necessary even at the planet's highest peaks—but Song had heard such optimistic reports before, and gave them little credit.

The stranger could have been in military service, as there were permanent garrisons throughout the southern reaches and northern plains, but he hadn't the mien of an officer in the Army of the Green Standard, and Song could hardly imagine Madam Jade inviting a common foot-soldier to one of her parties. He could have been a farmer, too, tending the expansive fields of rice and grains that provided the three valley provinces with sustenance, but his eyes seemed a little quick to have spent a lifetime staring endlessly at unmoving seas of green shoots or chessboard squares of water and rice. With his thick arms and strong hands, he could be a miner, bringing up from the planet's heart the rocks and stones from which the refineries squeezed their breathable air. But what business would a miner have in the capital city of Yingzhou Province, much less one of Madam Jade's celebrations?

Having played enough of her game of speculations, Song sought out their hostess for facts instead. She found Madam Jade deep in conversation in a far corner with Rahk-San, a woman of British extraction who spoke an antique form of Mandarin with stammering grace, but who could always be counted on for an amusing anecdote. Madam Jade was dressed in a high-necked dress of deeply embroidered silk, her hair lac-

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quered back in a matronly bun. A conservative look, as would befit the honored wife of a high civil servant, but which hardly hinted at the heart that burned within.

Song Huagu herself affected male dress, even going so far as to shave her forehead in the traditional Manchurian fashion, but while this did little to deter her admirers among the men in her circle—to say nothing of a certain segment of the women—Song couldn't help but feel that she was the inverse of Madam Jade. While Song's own mode of dress was daring and iconoclastic, at heart she was still in many ways the girl she'd been raised to be, granddaughter of the military governor of the Fangzhang province, her instincts and leanings inescapably conservative and provincial.

Madam Jade, by contrast, with her typically reserved demeanor and appearance, was a true libertine, and rumored tribadist. She had immigrated from Earth under something of a cloud, the rumors said, though she would never admit to the reasons. With her fascinations for odd insects, her house was littered with hanging cages filled with all manner of chirping and clacking creatures. During her almost interminable gatherings, to which she invited musicians, philosophers, writers, and artists from across the whole Tianfei Valley—chief among them the self-styled Deviates of whom Song Huagu was one—Madam Jade would take a favorite pet from its cage, and, keeping it on a leash of silver chain fine as a child's hair, parade around the party with the insect blissfully chattering and chirruping away on her shoulder.

Seeing Song's approach, Madam Jade skillfully extracted herself from the conversation with the British woman, and, stroking the praying mantis perched on her forearm, drifted over.

"Song Huagu," Madam Jade lilted, inclining her head slightly and drawing up level with Song, "I had not noticed your arrival. I hope the Spring Lantern Festival finds you well?"

Song nodded slightly.

"I could not have missed one of your parties, O Celestial Hostess," Song said, "even if I have spent the better part of this evening in a dark corner. I'm afraid that the Spring Lantern Festival finds me wrestling with an enigma."

"A riddle?" Madam Jade answered, an arch smile on her painted lips. "To vex even the great thinker and fabled novelist herself?"

Song forced a smile.

"Not so great, nor nearly so fabled, my dear Madam Jade, as you would have your foreign guests believe."

"Everyone likes the idea of touching greatness," Madam Jade said, "if only for a fleeting moment, and those who brave the long voyage across the dead sea plains, or, encased in porcelain and steel, across the cold interplanetary gulfs, come to the storied city of Fuchuan to touch greatness, in some form or fashion. It is merely my role, as unacknowledged ambassador to the larger world, to arrange matters so that they may do so." Madam Jade paused, whispering brief endearments to her mantis. "Speaking of which," she continued, "where is your paramour, Pan Xo? The Hegemon of the Southern Fastness was here earlier, anxious that I introduce him to the most respected zither virtuoso of our generation."

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A shadow passed over Song's face, for the barest instant.

"He is at his rooms on the Avenue of Flowers," Song answered. "His health, never the best, has taken a turn for the worse these past weeks, and I'm afraid he is too ill to go abroad most days."

Madam Jade reached out a hand tipped in golden nails, and brushed Song's elbow with a brief touch.

"My sympathies, Song Huagu," Madam Jade said. "I know it must be difficult. I shall have to visit Pan Xo at his rooms, some day in the not too distant future." Brightening, she leaned in close, and whispered conspiratorially. "Now, what about this riddle you mention?"

Inclining her head slightly, Song indicated the stranger at the far side of the room, who was deep in conversation with a composer whose name Song could never recall.

"I have been attempting to divine the identity of one of your partygoers," Song answered, "but, so far, have met with no success."

Madam Jade followed her gaze, and smiled.

"His name is Jiang Hu," Madam Jade answered, "a visitor from the Northern plains to our fair city, native to the mining regions. He spends more time, as I understand it, studying politics and economics than down digging with his brethren, though his hands still seem blackened by some amount of industry." Madam Jade raised her painted eyebrows in a meaningful look, and drifted off to see to her other guests.

Song Huagu looked at the stranger with renewed interest. The hidden meaning of Madam Jade's comment about "blackened" hands had not gone unnoticed.

In the days that followed, Song Huagu found herself again and again thinking of the stranger, Jiang Hu. She was now convinced that he was an agitator with an insurrectionist movement, but propriety kept her from broaching the subject outright. She had to see him again, arrange an introduction, and draw him out by subtle means.

Meeting with her publisher in his offices in the Trade District, Song found herself almost completely unable to follow the thread of his conversation, concentrating instead on strategy relating to meeting the enigmatic stranger.

"Huagu," the publisher said, addressing her as a father would a child, "we simply *must* have your next manuscript by the end of the season, or the markets will be in an uproar. I can appreciate your desire to test your talents in more diverse arenas, but these articles and essays for the periodicals are diluting your energies. To say nothing of the fact that they are, at best, in questionable political taste, and, at worst, actionable offenses. If the governor or his ministers ever deigned to read one of your diatribes, or, worse yet, you came to the attention of the Emperor back on Earth, may-he-reign-ten-thousand-years, your life wouldn't be worth the blank paper you write upon."

"I do not write what the people want to read, Chu," Song answered, "I tell them what they *should* read."

"Well, what *I* think the people should read is your next novel," the publisher said. "Politics are all well and good for civil servants and those who

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have passed their examinations, but for lowly merchants like myself, and the humble people whom we serve, they are nothing but a waste of air and ink. What the people want is wuxia, novels of the martial spirit, grand tales of men and women from ordinary circumstances rising to perform extraordinary feats. You should write more like your *The Romance of the Princess and the Bandit. That's* what people want to read! Not calls for social reforms, and reviews of musical performances no right-thinking person can sit through without gouging out their own eardrums."

"I have in mind a story set in a world unlike our own, in some altered history," Song answered, her eyes drifting to the corners of the room, "where, rather than China conquering the whole of the Earth, some other power beat us to it. The Mexica, perhaps. Or the Hindu."

"The Hindu?" the publisher repeated, flabbergasted. "You might just as easily imagine the *Britons* had conquered the Earth! May the gods and ancestors save me from more of your 'speculations'! The last batch sold hardly at all, barely covering the price of printing them. No more."

In a single movement, Song rose up from her seat, her manner distracted. She started toward the door.

"By the end of the season, Huagu!" the publisher repeated, rising up, his hands pressed down on the pitted wood of his wide desk. "I need your next manuscript by then, and no later."

Song nodded absently, but paused at the threshold to call back over her shoulder.

"Oh, I don't think I mentioned," she said. "I have been commissioned by the Imperial Fuchuan Opera to write the script of their next program, so I may be busy with that for some time to come. But I will get that novel to you soon, Chu. I promise. It will be the Mexica, I think."

Song turned and drifted out of the room, not noticing the red-faced state in which she'd left the publisher.

That night, at Pan Xo's rooms on the Avenue of Flowers, Song's thoughts were on the northern miner all through the evening meal.

Song Huagu and Pan Xo had been friends and lovers for years, but though they shared their lives, and their beds, they shared neither a house nor marital vows. Song had left her grandmother's home in Fangzhang province years before to escape an arranged marriage that threatened to ruin every dream she had in life. Despite the deep and long affection she held for the zither-player, Pan, Song could never bring herself again to look favorably on the idea of matrimony. Her life was her own, to be shared with others when and where she saw fit.

Song knew that Pan would prefer a more traditional arrangement, with the two of them sharing a roof and living as husband and wife, but Song had grown too attached to her freedoms in her years in the city to ever concede. Pan accepted things as they were, reluctantly, for fear of the alternative.

Throughout the meal, Pan Xo kept up a lively string of anecdotes and amusements from his day, interrupted by persistent wet coughs. By the time the first course was done, and his servants were laying out the second, the little square of silk with which he covered his coughing was already stained an unpleasant brown with clotted blood.

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Song felt as though she were betraying Pan just by *thinking* of another man in his presence, especially when Pan's health had deteriorated so fast, so far. She did her best to remain engaged in his conversation, and not to turn her head in disgust when he was racked by ever more violent coughs. Even so, her distraction had not escaped his notice.

"Huagu, my love," Pan Xo said, clearing his throat with a grimace and dabbing at the corners of his mouth with a fresh silk square. "You seem a thousand miles away. Where are your thoughts?"

Song's breath caught, and her face involuntarily flushed red.

"I am thinking of the opera, dear heart," Song Huagu answered.

"Oh," Pan said, brightening. "What do you think you will write on?"

Song sighed, despite herself.

"I am thinking of writing something about the miners in the northern plains," she answered.

The following week brought warm breezes from the north, carrying with them dark, acrid smoke that yellowed the sky by day and obscured the stars by night. The lanterns, left hanging after the festival the week before, were the only constellations visible by which men's fate could be steered.

At yet another party at Madam Jade's salon, Song Huagu had arranged an introduction to Jiang Hu, through the auspices of the hostess herself. Song had made guarded inquires about Jiang during the week past, among those in her circle who she knew had met with him, and learned that he had come to the city to raise funds from those in the moneyed classes sympathetic to the miners' cause. Shorter hours, better conditions, and higher wages seemed the central pillars, though Song had heard whispers of more radical agendas among the miners and their supporters.

"Jiang Hu, honored guest," Madam Jade said, guiding the northern man gently by the elbow to Song's orbit, "allow me to present Fuchuan's favorite daughter, the great thinker and greater writer, Song Huagu."

Jiang Hu bowed, while Song bobbed her head in response.

Having made the connection, Madam Jade glided off into the party, petting the enormous orange-and-black beetle clinging to her shoulder.

"I am honored to make your acquaintance, Song Huagu," Jiang Hu said. "I am, of course, familiar with your work, though I must admit that I have little time to read for pleasure myself. When I was at the Imperial Academy, though, many of my fellow examinees did little else but read your novels, which I am afraid to say was reflected in their poor examination scores."

"You took the examinations?" Song asked, more than a little surprised. "But, then, why didn't you enter civil service yourself?"

Jiang Hu took a deep breath, and a faraway look crept into his dark eyes.

"Having learned enough philosophy, cosmology, theology, and law to serve the Emperor," he answered, "I had also come to learn that I could better serve my fellow man. My father was a miner, and the son of miners, and it was his fondest wish that I would leave that life behind. While I was still away at my studies, he was killed when an improperly reinforced chamber collapsed, crushing him beneath. If the mines and their wardens were held to the same high standards as those seeking civil service, my fa-

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ther would doubtless be alive today. So I returned to the Imperial Carbonate-Nitrate Mines, got a shift as an entry-level miner, and set about learning for myself just what needed to be improved. Now that I know, I have returned to the city, to raise funds necessary to effect direct change."

Song eyed him with increased respect, but also with the suspicion that he was not being entirely forthcoming.

"I wonder, given your background," she said, casually, "about your impression of my essay for this week's *Fuchuan Ledger*."

Jiang Hu shrugged, apologetically.

"I'm sorry," he answered, "but I've been so busy since coming to the city that I've had little time to keep up with the news of the day, and am afraid I've not had the chance to read that essay."

"Well," Song replied, "it's on the subject of insurrectionist movements, which seem to spring up like lichen in the outer districts, particularly the north. The White Lotus, the Red Turbans, the Orphan Band . . ." She paused, significantly, and added, "The Black Hands."

She watched Jiang Hu's face closely for any sign, any reaction, but if she'd touched a nerve, his expression did not betray him, the only change a slight narrowing of the eyes.

"As I have said," he answered in measured tones, "I have not yet read it."

"You must allow me, then, to bring you a copy of the abstract to review," Song said, "as I'm sure you'd have a unique perspective on the topic." She paused, looking him in the eyes. "Since you come from a region known for insurrection, naturally."

With a wary nod, Jiang Hu agreed. While they arranged the details, Madam Jade reappeared, the orange-and-black beetle on her shoulder and Pan Xo at her side.

"Song Huagu," Madam Jade sang, "look who managed to rouse himself from bed to attend my little assembly!"

"Well, Madam Jade," Pan Xo answered, "when I received your personal and heartfelt invitation, how could I possibly refuse?"

"Precisely put," Madam Jade said, taking Pan Xo's elbow. "Master Pan, allow me to introduce Song Huagu's newest friend and admirer, Jiang Hu."

Pan Xo, looking with some small confusion from Song to Jiang Hu and back, gave a small bow, and then moved to stand next to Song.

"Your servant," Jiang Hu said, bowing in return.

"I apologize for my intrusion," Madam Jade said, turning away. "I will leave you to your dialogue, as I have other guests to attend to."

The three, Song, Jiang, and Pan, were left standing together, an odd and strangled silence hanging over them.

Two days later, Song Huagu and Jiang Hu met at a tea house at the southern edge of the city, with an expansive view of the Tianfei Valley's south cliff wall, and, beyond, the towering majesty of the Heaven's Ladder, rising up from the docking pyramid to the geosynchronous orbital platform high overhead. Jiang read the handwritten manuscript pages of Song's article, the characters drawn in a swift and sure hand, while she

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looked on, serenely smoking from a long-handled engraved-silver pipe that had belonged to her father, and her grandfather before him.

When he had finished, Jiang set the pages down gently on the table between them, and regarded Song with a long look.

"You seem to have some high regard for many of the insurrectionists," he said evenly. "I would think that was a dangerous opinion to hold for someone in a position such as yours."

"On the contrary, Jiang Hu," she replied, drawing deeply from the pipe before continuing and breathing out twin streams of blue smoke from her nostrils. "Someone in my position is duty-bound to express their true feelings, and my true feelings and sympathies lie with those who seek to throw off the yoke of oppression."

"You sound like a revolutionary," Jiang said, guardedly.

"Do I?"

Jiang took a deep breath, and considered his next statement.

"The princial problem facing insurrectionists is not, as one might think, the threat of military force," he went on, finally. "The key concern is one of proper funding. To wage a war, even one of ideas such as that fought by, say, the Black Hands, is an expensive proposition, and yet, ironically, one of the main issues driving many to join such movements in the first place is the lack of proper financial compensation for their labors. So, from where is the funding to come?"

Song tapped out the burnt ashes from the pipe's bowl into a tray before her.

"Unfortunate, then," she answered, "that such a movement, the Black Hands, for example, does not have a tireless champion such as yourself to travel to the centers of commerce to raise monies for their purpose."

A slow smile played across Jiang's face.

"Yes," he said with some amusement, "it *is* unfortunate."

The pair of them dined that evening at Song's home, and Jiang stayed on long after the servants had been dismissed.

In the twilight hours, lying side by side on Song's wide couch, their naked flesh sweat-slicked and cooled by the slight breeze through the open shutters, Song told Jiang about her grandest ambitions, of what she hoped to accomplish through her art.

"I want to give people not just entertainment, but inspiration," she said in a low voice, her mouth brought near his cheek. "To communicate to the masses through populist novel or play what I try to communicate to the enlightened classes through my essays and articles."

"I know few miners who can read, whether article or novel," Jiang whispered, caressing Song's waist with the tips of his fingers.

"Through the plays, then," Song answered, passionately. "Through spoken word, and dance, and song, to communicate the fundamental rights that I think no society can survive without."

Jiang kissed her neck, and whispered, "And what are those?"

"Redistribution of property," Song said, tangling her fingers in Jiang's long hair. "Property ownership and inheritance for women," she added,

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brushing her lips against his forehead. "Repeal of laws preventing women from divorcing their husbands or remarrying after their husband's death," she said, shivering as Jiang's touch grazed across her belly. "Universal suffrage," she finished.

Jiang shifted, and took her in his arms.

"You sound like a revolutionary," he said.

"I am," she answered, breathless. "Oh, I am!"

The next morning, while Jiang Hu dressed and Song Huagu wrote a few lines of her script for the opera in bed, a writing tablet balanced on her knees, a servant entered, announcing visitors.

"Show them in," Song answered absently, intent on her work, pausing only to draw a blanket up over her naked shoulders. She could not abide interruptions when she worked, but it was usually quicker to dispense with visitors in person than deal with any formalities.

Song heard the sound of her chamber door sliding open, and then a quick intake of breath. Annoyed at the distraction, she looked up, and found Pan Xo and Madam Jade standing at the threshold.

Pan looked shocked, eyes wide, while Madam Jade hid a sly smile behind a fan.

Song was confused, unsure at the reasons for his reaction, until she followed his gaze to the far side of the room, where Jiang Hu stood, still half-dressed, his hair tousled.

"Oh, Xo," Song breathed, throwing off the writing tablet and rising up. As she did, the blanket slid from her shoulders, so that when she reached her feet, she stood naked and unadorned.

Pan's face cracked, and his shoulders began to quiver.

"Xo!" Song said, scrambling to snatch up the blanket and reach out to him at the same time. "Please, don't react like this. I can make things right. . . ."

Pan wailed, an inhuman sound, and turned and stormed from the room.

Madam Jade turned, and watched him race out through the hallway and into the street beyond.

"Mmmm," Madam Jade said, still hiding a smile behind the lacquered fan, "if I'd known that we'd prove this much of an inconvenience, I wouldn't have suggested this early morning trip at all."

"Is everything all right?" Jiang Hu said, tightening his belt and striding to Song's side.

"Yes," Song said, then with a shake of her head, added, "No. I don't know."

"Is he . . . your husband?" Jiang asked, hesitantly.

"No," Song answered with a shake of her head. "Of that much I'm sure."

Jiang breathed a sigh of relief, which Song could not share. Her life was more complicated than the present vocabulary could accommodate.

"I will take my leave of you," Madam Jade said, rustling her fan. "I do have a single question, though, which I hate to leave without asking."

"Yes," Song said, her tone annoyed. "What is it?"

"Well, I was simply wondering if any of you had seen my missing pet.

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My bombardier beetle, bred for size, went missing after my party of a few nights back. The same night that I introduced you two, I believe, so you should remember. About this big?" She held her index finger and thumb out, stretched as far apart as they could go.

Jiang shook his head, and Song added, "No, I haven't seen it."

"Oh, well," Madam Jade answered, turning to the door. "It went missing right after I spoke with Pan Xo the last time, and I've asked simply everyone if they've seen it, but no one has. I was hoping perhaps it was here, as one of the partygoers thought they might have seen it clinging to Master Pan's sleeve when he left, and it wasn't to be found at his home this morning. Terribly dangerous creature, though, I'll warn you, so if you should see it, keep your distance. That's what I've been telling everyone."

Madam Jade drifted out, leaving Jiang Hu and Song Huagu standing together in the bedroom.

After Jiang had gone, Song hurried to the Avenue of Flowers and Pan Xo's rooms, but his servants insisted he'd not been home since he'd left early that morning in the company of Madam Jade. Inconsolable, Song returned to her house in the Arts District, and spent the day out in the garden, furiously at work on the script for the opera. She composed lyrics for a half-dozen songs especially for the story, and, late into the night, improved on the theme and the characters.

Long after the sun had set, and the twin moons had risen high overhead, Jiang Hu appeared at her balcony, a bottle of rice wine in hand. Wordlessly, Song opened the window, and allowed him into her bed.

The next morning, Song delivered the completed script and lyrics to the Master of Events at the Imperial Fuchuan Opera. When he went to count out her payment, she waved him off with a quick motion of her ink-stained hand.

"Please, honored sir," she said, "I ask no fee for my work, only that you agree to include this production in your summer touring program, once the run in the city is complete."

The Master of Events, quickly calculating the coins saved not only by getting this script for free, but by not having to commission another script for the touring production, assented without hesitation.

"But why, I hazard to ask," the Master of Events said, reluctantly, "do you forgo your payment in this manner?"

"I want only that this story be heard," Song answered, "by those who would not otherwise hear it."

Leaving the opera house, crossing the wide square before the Lower Temple, down the boulevard to the Avenue of Flowers, Song again found Pan Xo not at home. She then made for the trade district, and the boarding house where Jiang Hu had hired a room, but found him out as well.

Not eager to return to the solitude of her home, but with nowhere else to go, Song wandered through the city streets, watching as municipal workers took down the last of the lanterns hung for the festival weeks before. She tried to remember the names she had given to the different configurations, to remember which constellation she stood beneath when in

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the shadow of the Governor's Palace, which when standing in the Red Flower District.

The smoke from the north, which Jiang had explained came from a still-burning fire ignited when miners broke through into a pocket of inflammable natural gases, hung low over the city, giving the sky a sickly, grayish-yellow cast. None that she passed in the city streets—people complaining of the smell, or coughing, or covering their noses and mouths with ineffectual cotton masks—stopped to wonder about the dozens of lives burned away in the first instant that the gas pocket caught flame. The problems of those who provided the valley provinces with the air they breathed were far from the thoughts of those in the city, who remembered them only if they failed in their appointed tasks.

That evening, Song Huagu returned home late, after her servants had left for the night, to find her rooms dark and cold. Through the dim hallways, lit only by the weak moonlight eeking through the thick cover of smoke, Song made her way to her bedchamber.

As she stepped through the doorway, she knew that something wasn't right. Some subtle air in the room, some feeling that prickled at her shaven forehead—a premonition.

Song fumbled for the light, and, as the lanterns warmed and began to glow, a strange scene resolved before her eyes.

Lying in the middle of the floor was Jiang Hu, face-down on the tile. There was something amiss about the back of his neck, and, as Song took tentative steps closer, she could see that there was a large, red hole at the base of his skull. It looked as though the skin and flesh below had been boiled away, a froth of blood and foam around the ragged mouth of the wound.

Song's breath caught in her throat, and she was unable to speak. Staggering forward, arms outstretched, she drew near the still, cold form of her lover.

Before she could allow herself to collapse, to surrender to her shock and grief, a stream of murky red caught her eye near the foot of her couch. There, lying stretched out lengthwise, as he had so many nights before, lay Pan Xo, eyes wide and sightless, his wrists a bloody ruin. On the cold floor, near his outstretched hand, lay a slender knife, stained red with blood.

Song's thoughts rebelled. The simple story that fit the scene she'd stumbled upon was too horrible to contemplate. The two men she loved, dead at her feet, one seemingly the architect of the other's demise. But why? Over her? Pan Xo was the gentlest creature she'd ever known. How could he rouse himself to such a deed?

There came a rustling from the dark corner, and Song wheeled to see a primly dressed woman with a lacquered matronly bun slide into view, an enormous orange-and-black beetle perched on her forearm.

"Jade," Song whispered.

"I am sorry it came to this, Song Huagu," Madam Jade said, gently stroking the beetle on her outstretched arm. "I truly am. I'd thought I could engineer your deaths, Jiang Hu's and yours, at the hands of Pan Xo,

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and so, at the very least, your leaving this life would have something of a personal touch. Unfortunately, Master Pan could not stir himself to action, and I was forced to handle matters myself. The end result, so far as the public is concerned, will be indistinguishable, but I'm afraid you'll be left departing this life with more questions than you might otherwise have done."

"Why?" was all Song managed to say.

"I owe you at least a few answers, I should think," Madam Jade said, "having brought you to this sorry state. I'm not like the painted villains in your tawdry wuxia stories, I'm afraid, so I won't spell out chapter and verse of my plans and ambitions before sending you off to the netherworld, but I do think that I owe you some little comfort. The Emperor finds him," she pointed a gold-nailed finger at the still form of Jiang Hu, "a threat to the stability of the planet, and the empire in general, and I couldn't help but agree, and so when I was ordered to eliminate him, I felt no hesitation. He, I'm afraid," she indicated the body of Pan Xo on the couch, "was merely a means to an end, and I confess that I regret his passing. While I don't think he's quite the virtuoso at the zither that you provincials think he is, he nevertheless was a fine conversationalist, and a pleasant partygoer."

Song blinked back confused tears, trying to make sense of the rush of words.

"The Emperor?" she said simply.

"Yes, of course," Madam Jade said, stroking the giant beetle. "As a member of the Embroidered Guard, I take my direction directly from the Dragon Throne itself."

"Y-you're a spy?" Song asked, bewildered.

"Naturally," Madam Jade said. "Now, as to you. I could have easily arranged for Jiang Hu to be murdered in an alleyway for the coins in his purse, but my orders were to arrange for your elimination as well. Hence, the stagecraft."

"*Me?* But *why?*" Song's face tightened, her confusion edging into anger. "What have I done?"

"If you ask *me*, nothing," Madam Jade answered. "I think that you are merely a spinner of second-rate tales that amuse the millions, and little else. But my masters in the Eastern Depot think that ideas in themselves are dangerous, and that your ideas are among the most dangerous. Of all the so-named 'Deviates,' who flaunt their aberrant lifestyles and attitudes in the public view, your habit of expressing inflammatory ideas through your writing presents the danger that such aberration might *spread.*" She paused, and smiled cruelly. "If you'd stuck to love stories and martial arts sagas, this might have been avoided."

Song looked from the horror of Jiang's neck, to the ruin of Pan's wrists, to Madam Jade.

"What have you done to them?" she asked, defiant.

"Well, as you can see, the story will be that Pan Xo, despondent over the loss of his illicit lover to the arms of another man, took his own life by slashing open his own veins, but not before dispatching his lover and her dallier in a more, shall we say, dramatic fashion." Madam Jade lifted her

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arm higher, to bring the enormous insect into closer view. "Enough people saw Pan Xo standing by my side at my last party, and saw his reaction to you and Jiang together that night, that they'll little wonder why he saw fit to take this lovely creature from my little zoo. Not that Master Pan ever came near my pet, of course, but the story has been spread far enough that the darling was missing, and Pan the last to see it, that the public will make the natural connection." She reached up a long-nailed finger to brush the black shell of the insect. "A bombardier beetle, as I said, bred for size, at least four times as large as nature intended him to grow. His talent, from which his name derives, grew in accordance." Madam Jade pointed to a small aperture at the rear of the creature's shell. "The beetle produces in separate compartments two chemicals, which, when combined in air, react in a most spectacular way."

Madam Jade smiled, and gestured toward the still form of Jiang Hu and his wound with the tip of a finger.

"An acidic compound potent enough to burn through skin, muscle, and bone in a matter of heartbeats," she went on. "So, the story will be that Pan Xo came to your rooms, to find you and your new lover together, and, with the aid of the deadly creature he stole from my salon, killed you both."

"No," Song Huagu said, shaking her head and looking from Jiang Hu to Pan Xo and back again. "Not like this."

"I'm sorry, dear, but it must be done. We all serve the Emperor in our own way," Madam Jade said, drawing near and taking the beetle in both hands, its head toward hers. "Don't worry, Song Huagu. This will only hurt for a moment—but it will hurt a great deal."

Song turned, and tried to run for the door, but, in a blindingly fast move, Madam Jade swept her legs out from under her and sent Song falling hard on her back.

"Now, Pan Xo would have killed Jiang Hu from behind, but *you*," Madam Jade said, drawing closer, the beetle now a bare handbreadth away, "you he would have killed while looking you in the eye."

Steam rose from the beetle, and there followed blinding, searing pain.

As she lay dying, at the edge of hearing, Song heard Madam Jade speak one last time.

"You die, and your ideas die with you."

At that moment, across town, at the Imperial Fuchuan Opera House, the first performance of *The Miner's Journey* ended, to thunderous applause. The story of an altered history, where blood-sacrificing Mexica Aztec warriors had conquered the world, the plot centered around a small group of humble miners who rose up against their oppressors to fight for a better life. In the city, it was fancy, pure fiction, an entertaining few hours to spend listening to the music, watching the drama unfold, and losing oneself in the energetic athletics of the martial artist portraying the miners' leader.

When it came time for the company to tour the countryside, with audiences made up of miners, and farmers, and poorly paid soldiers, a different story would be heard. ○

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WHAT TO TAKE AND NOT TO THE ENCHANTED FOREST

Your cell phone.

The children's babysitter.

All your rage and frustration wound into a tight bundle at the core of your being and ready to explode.

Lots of tasty trail mix.

Your pet cougar.

Deep Woods Elf Repellent. Ask for it by name.

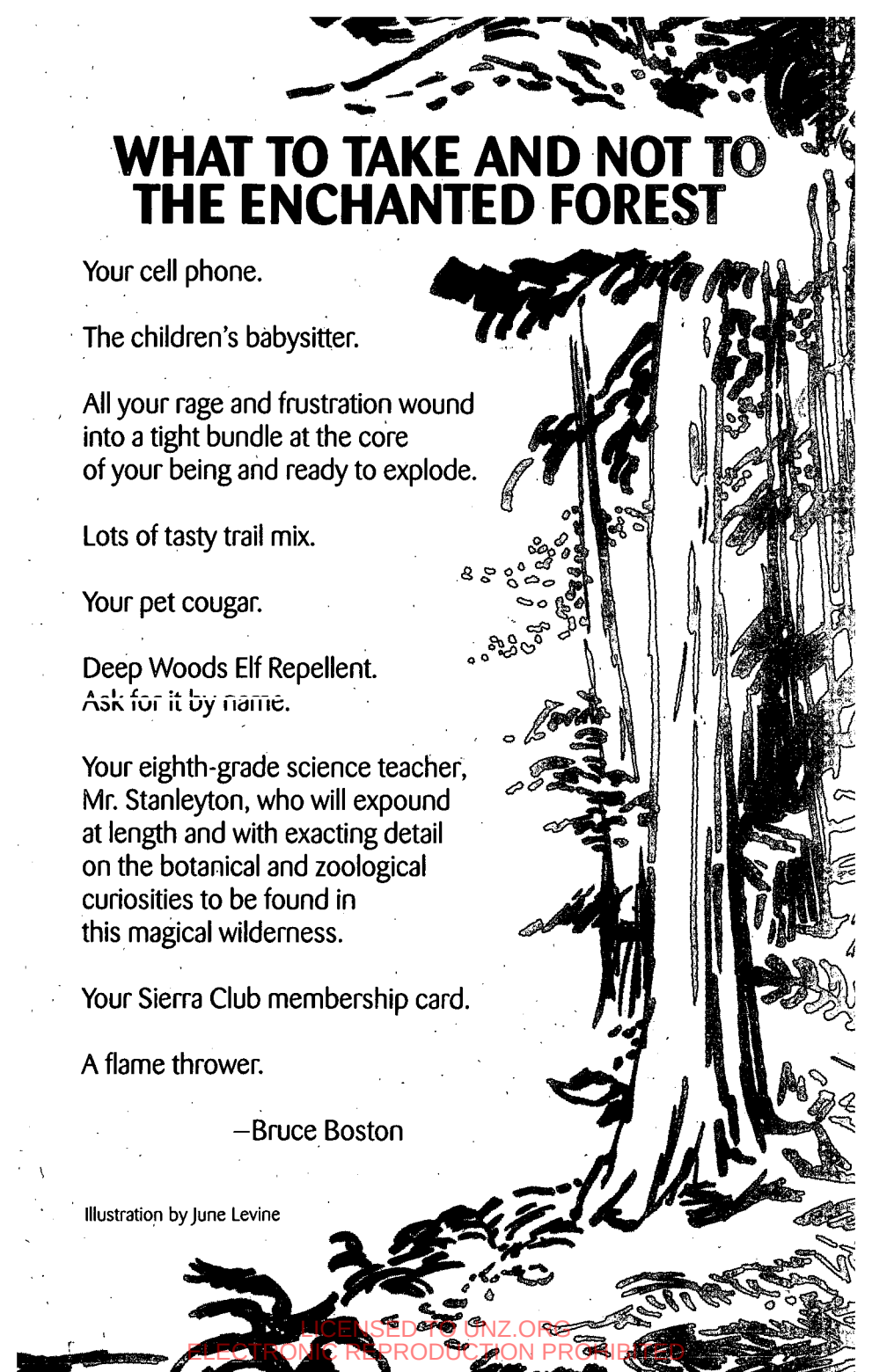
Your eighth-grade science teacher, Mr. Stanleyton, who will expound at length and with exacting detail on the botanical and zoological curiosities to be found in this magical wilderness.

Your Sierra Club membership card.

A flame thrower.

—Bruce Boston

Illustration by June Levine



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STROOD

Neal Asher

Neal Asher has been an SF and fantasy junkie ever since "having my mind distorted at an early age by J.R.R. Tolkien, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and E.C. Tubb. Sometime after leaving school, I decided to focus on only one of my many interests because it was inclusive of the others: writing." The author's fifth book, *Brass Man,* will be out next April from Pan Macmillan, and his sixth book, *The Voyage of the Sable Keech* is all but complete. Readers can find out more about Mr. Asher at *http://freespace.virgin.net/n.asher.*

Like a Greek harp standing four meters tall and three wide, its center-curtain body rippling in some unseen wind, the strood shimmered across the park, tendrils groping for me, their stinging pods shiny and bloated. Its voice was the sound of some bedlam ghost in a big empty house: muttering, then bellowing guttural nonsense. Almost instinctively, I ran toward the nearest pathun, with the monster close behind me. The pathun's curiol matrix reacted with a nacreous flash, displacing us both into a holding cell. I was burnt—red skin visible through holes in my shirt—but whether from the strood or the pathun, I don't know. The strood, its own curiol matrix cut by that of the pathun, lay nearby like a pile of bloody seaweed. I stared about myself at the ten-by-ten box with its floor littered with stones, bones, and pieces of carapace. I really wanted to cry.

"Love! Eat you!" the strood had bellowed. "Eat you! Pain!"

It could have been another of those damned translator problems. The gilst—slapped onto the base of my skull and growing its spines into my brain with agonizing precision—made the latest Pentium Synaptic look like an abacus with most of its beads missing. Unfortunately, with us humans, the gilst is a lot brighter than its host. Mine initially loaded all English on the assumption that I knew the *whole* of that language, and translating something from say, a pathun, produced stuff from all sorts of obscure vocabularies: scientific, philosophic, sociological, political. *All* of them. What had that dyspeptic newt with its five ruby eyes and exterior mobile intestine said to me shortly after my arrival?

"Translocate fifteen degrees sub-axial to hemispherical concrescence of poly-carbon interface."

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I'd asked where the orientating machine was, and it could have just pointed to the lump on the nearby wall and said, "Over there."

After forty-six hours in the space station, I was managing, by the feedback techniques that load into your mind like an instruction manual the moment the spines begin to dig in, to limit the gilst's vocabulary to my feeble one, and thought I'd got a handle on it, until my encounter with the strood. I'd even managed to stop it translating what the occasional patronizing mugull would ask me every time I stopped to gape at some extraordinary sight, as "Is one's discombobulation requiring pellucidity?" I knew the words, but couldn't shake the feeling that either the translator or the mugull was having a joke at my expense. All not too good when really I had no time to spare for being lost on the station—I wanted to see so much before I died.

The odds of survival, before the pathun lander set down on the Antarctic, had been one-in-ten for surviving more than five years. My lung cancer, lodged in both lungs, considerably reduced those odds for me. By the time pathun technology started filtering out, my cancer had metastized, sending out scouts to inspect other real estate in my body. And when I finally began to receive any benefits of that technology, my cancer had established a burgeoning population in my liver and colonies in other places too numerous to mention.

"We cannot help you," the mugull doctor had told me, as it floated a meter off the ground in the pathun hospital on the Isle of Wight. Hospitals like this one were springing up all over Earth, like Medicins Sans Frontières establishments in some Third World backwater. Mostly run by mugulls meticulously explaining to our witchdoctors where they were going wrong. To the more worshipful of the population, that name might as well have stood for, "alien angels like translucent manta rays." But the contraction of "mucus gull" that became their name is more apposite for the majority, and their patronizing attitude comes hard from something that looks like a floating sheet of veined snot with two beaks, black button eyes, and a transparent nematode body smelling of burning bacon.

"Pardon?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing: they were miracle workers who had crossed mind-numbing distances to come here to employ their magical technologies. This mugull explained it to me in perfect English, without a translator. It, and others like it, had managed to create those nanofactories that sat in the liver pumping out DNA repair nanomachines. Now this was okay if you got your nactor before your DNA was damaged. It meant eternal youth, so long as you avoided stepping in front of a truck. But, for me, there was just too much damage already, so my nactor couldn't distinguish patient from disease.

"But . . . you will be able to cure me?" I still couldn't quite take it in.

"No." A flat reply. And with that, I began to understand, began to put together facts I had thus far chosen to ignore.

People were still dying in huge numbers all across Earth, and the alien doctors had to prioritize. In Britain, it's mainly the wonderful bugs tenderly nurtured by our national health system to be resistant to just about every antibiotic going. In fact, the mugulls had some problems getting people into their hospitals in the British Isles, because over the last decade,

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hospitals had become more dangerous to the sick than anywhere else. Go in to have an ingrown toenail removed; MRSA or a variant later, and you're down the road in a hermetically sealed plastic coffin. However, most alien resources were going into the same countries as Frontières' went to: to battle a daily death rate, numbered in tens of thousands, from new air-transmitted HIVs, rampant Ebola, and that new tuberculosis that can eat your lungs in about four days. And I don't know if they are winning.

"Please . . . you've got to help me."

No good. I knew the statistics, and, like so many, had been an avid student of all things alien ever since their arrival. Even by stopping to talk to me as its curiol matrix wafted it from research ward to ward, the mugull might be sacrificing other lives. Resources again. They had down to an art what our own crippled health service had not been able to apply in fact without outcry: if three people have a terminal disease and you have the resources to save only two of them, that's what you *do*, you don't ruin it in a futile attempt to save them all. This mugull, applying all its skill and available technologies, could certainly save me, it could take my body apart and rebuild it cell by cell if necessary, but meanwhile, ten, twenty, a thousand other people with less serious, but no less terminal conditions, would die.

"Here is your ticket," it said, and something spat out of its curiol matrix to land on my bed as it wafted away.

I stared down at the yellow ten-centimeter disk. Thousands of these had been issued, and governments had tried to control whom to, and why. Mattered not a damn to any of the aliens; they gave them to those they considered fit, and only the people they were intended for could use them . . . to travel offworld. I guess it was my consolation prize.

A mugull autosurgeon implanted a cybernetic assister frame. This enabled me to get out of bed and head for the shuttle platform moored off the Kent coast. There wasn't any pain at first, as the surgeon had used a nerve-block that took its time to wear off, but I felt about as together as rotten lace. As the nerve-block wore off, I went back onto my inhalers, and patches where the bone cancer was worst, and a cornucopia of pills.

On the shuttle, which basically looked like a train carriage, I attempted to concentrate on some of the alien identification charts I'd loaded into my notescreen, but the nagging pain and perpetual weariness made it difficult for me to concentrate. There was as odd a mix of people around me as you'd find on any aircraft: some woman with a baby in a papoose; a couple of suited heavies who could have been government, Mafia, or stockbrokers; and others. Just ahead of me was a group of two women and three men who, with plummy voices and scruffy-bordering-on-punk clothing—that upper-middle-class lefty look favored by most students—had to be the BBC documentary team I'd heard about. This was confirmed for me when one of the men removed a prominently labeled vidcam to film the non-human passengers. These were two mugulls and a pathun—the latter a creature like a two-meter woodlouse, front section folded upright with a massively complex head capable of revolving three-sixty, and a flat back onto which a second row of multiple limbs folded. As far as tool-using went, nature had provided pathuns with a work surface,

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clamping hands with the strength of a hydraulic vice, and other hands with digits fine as hairs. The guy with the vidcam lowered it after a while and turned to look around. Then he focused on me.

"Hi, I'm Nigel," he held out a hand, which I reluctantly shook. "What are you up for?"

I considered telling him to mind his own business, but then thought I could do with all the help I could get. "I'm going to the system base to die."

Within seconds, Nigel had his vidcam in my face, and one of his companions, Julia, had exchanged places with the passenger in the seat adjacent to me, and was pumping me with ersatz sincerity about how it felt to be dying, then attempting to stir some shit about the mugulls being unable to treat me on Earth. The interview lasted nearly an hour, and I knew they would cut and shape it to say whatever they wanted it to say.

When it was over, I returned my attention to the pathun, who I was sure had turned its head slightly to watch and listen in, though why I couldn't imagine. Perhaps it was interested in the primitive equipment the crew used. Apparently, one of these HG (heavy gravity) creatures, while being shown around Silicon Valley, accidentally rested its full weight on someone's laptop computer—think about dropping a barbell on a matchbox and you get the idea—then, without tools, repaired it in under an hour. And as if that wasn't miraculous enough, the computer's owner had discovered that the laptop's hard disk storage had risen from four hundred gigabytes to four terabytes. I would have said the story was apocryphal, but the laptop is now in the Smithsonian.

The shuttle docked at Eulogy Station, and the pathun disembarked first, which is just the way it is. Equality is a fine notion; the reality is that *they've* been knocking around the galaxy for half a million years. Pathuns are as far in advance of the other aliens as we are in advance of jellyfish, which makes you wonder where humans rate on their scale. As the alien went past me, heading for the door, I felt the slight air shift caused by its curiol matrix—that technology enabling other aliens, like mugulls, creatures whose home environment is an interstellar gas cloud not far above absolute zero, to live on the surface of Earth and easily manipulate their surroundings. Call it a force field, but it's much more than that. Another story about pathuns demonstrates some of what they can do with their curiol matrices:

All sorts of religious fanatic lunatic idiotic groups immediately, of course, considered superior aliens the cause of their woes, and valid targets, so it was only a week into the first alien walkabout that the first suicide bomber tried to take out a pathun amid a crowd. He detonated his device, but an invisible cylinder enclosed him and the plastique slow-burned—not a pretty sight. Other assassination attempts met with various suitable responses. The sharpshooter with his scoped rifle got the bullet he fired back through the scope and into his head. The bomber in Spain just disappeared along with his car, only to reappear, still behind the wheel, traveling at mach four down on top of the farmhouse his fellow Basque terrorists had made their base. Thereafter, attempts started to drop off, not because of any reduction in terrorist lunacy, but because of a huge increase in security when a balek (those floating LGAs that look

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like great big apple cores) off-handedly mentioned what incredible restraint the pathuns—beings capable of translocating planet Earth into its own sun—were showing.

From Eulogy Station, it was, in both alien and my own terms, just a short step to the system base. The gate was just a big ring in one of the plazas of Eulogy, and you just stepped through it and you were there. The base, a giant stack of different-sized disks nine hundred and forty kilometers from top to bottom, orbited Jupiter. After translocating from some system eighty light-years away to our Oort Cloud, it had traveled to here at half the speed of light while the contact ships headed to Earth. Apparently, we had been ripe for contact: bright enough to understand what was happening, but stupid enough for our civilization not to end up imploding when confronted by such omnipotence.

In the system base, I began to find my way around, guided by an orientation download to my notescreen, and it was only then that I began to notice stroods everywhere. I had only ever seen pictures before, and, as far as I knew, none had ever been to Earth. But why were there so many thousands here, now? Then, of course, I allowed myself a hollow laugh. What the hell did it matter to *me?* Still, I asked Julia and Nigel when I ran into them again.

"According to our researcher, they're pretty low on the species scale and only space-faring because of pathun intervention." Julia studied her notescreen—uncomfortable being the interviewee. Nigel was leaning over the rail behind her, filming down an immense metallic slope on which large limpetlike creatures clung sleeping in their thousands: stroods in their somnolent form.

Julia continued, "Some of the other races regard stroods as pathun pets, but then, *we're* not regarded much higher by many of them."

"But why so many thousands here?" I asked.

Angrily, she gestured at the slope. "I've asked, and every time, I've been told to go and ask the pathuns. They ignore us, you know—far too busy about their important tasks."

I resisted the impulse to point out that creatures capable of crossing the galaxy perhaps did not rank the endless creation of media pap very high. I succumbed then to one more "brief" interview before managing to slip away, and then, losing my way to my designated hotel, ended up in one of the parks, aware that a strood was following me. . . .

Sitting in the holding cell, I eyed the monster and hoped that its curiol matrix wouldn't start up again, as in here I had nowhere to run, and, being the contacted species, no curiol matrix of my own. The environment of a system station is that of the system species, us, so we didn't need the matrix for survival, and anyway, you don't give the kiddies sharp objects to play with right away. I was beginning to wonder if maybe running at that pathun had been such a bright idea, when I was abruptly translocated again, and found myself stumbling into the lobby of an apparently ordinary-looking hotel. I did a double take, then turned round and walked out through the revolving doors and looked around. Yep, an apparently normal city street—except for Jupiter in the sky. This was the area I'd been trying to find before my confrontation with the strood: the human

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section, a nice homey, normal-seeming base for us so we wouldn't get too confused or frightened. I went back into the hotel, limping a bit now, despite the assister frame, and wheezing because I'd lost my inhaler, and the patches and pills were beginning to wear off.

"David Hall," I said at the front desk. "I have a reservation."

The automaton dipped its polished chrome ant's head and eyed my damaged clothing, then it checked its screen, and after a moment it handed—or rather, clawed—over a key card. I headed for the elevator and soon found myself in the kind of room I'd never been able to afford on Earth, my luggage already stacked beside my bed, and a welcome pack on a nearby table. I opened the half bottle of champagne and began chugging it down as I walked out onto the balcony. Now what?

Prior to my brief exchange with the mugull doctor, I'd been told that my life expectancy was about four weeks, but that, "I'm sure the aliens will be able to do *something!*" Well, they had. The drugs and the assister frame enabled me to actually move about and take some pleasure in my remaining existence. The time limit, unfortunately, had not changed. So, I would see as much of this miraculous place as possible . . . but I'd avoid that damned park. I thought then about what had happened.

The park was fifteen kilometers across, with Earthly meadows, and forests of cycads like purple pineapples tall as trees. There were aliens everywhere, a lot of them strood. And one, which I was sure had been following me before freezing and standing like a monument in a field of daisies, started drifting toward me. I stepped politely aside, but it followed me and started making strange moaning sounds. I got scared then, but controlled myself, and stood still when it reached one of its tendrils out to me. Maybe it was just saying hello. The stinging cells clacked like maracas and my arm felt as if someone had whipped it, before turning numb as a brick. The monster started shaking then, as if this had got it all excited.

"Eat you!"

Damned thing. I don't mind being the primitive poor relation, but not the main course.

I turned round and went back into my room, opened my suitcase, found my spare inhaler and patches, and headed for the bathroom. An hour later, I was clean, and the pain in my body had receded to a distant ache I attempted to drive farther away with the contents of the minibar. I slept for the usual three hours, woke feeling sick, out of breath, and once again in pain. A few pulls from one inhaler opened up my lungs, and the other inhaler took away the feeling that someone was sandpapering the inside of my chest, then more pills gave me a further two hours sleep, and that, I knew, was as much as I was going to get.

I dressed, buttoning up my shirt while standing on the balcony and watching the street. No day or night here, just the changing face of Jupiter in an orange-blue sky. Standing there, gazing at the orb, I decided that I must have got it all wrong somehow. The aliens had only ever killed humans in self-defense, so somehow there had been a misunderstanding. Maybe, with the strood being pathun "pets," what had happened had been no more than the equivalent of someone being snapped at by a terrier in

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a park. I truly believed this. But that didn't stop me suddenly feeling very scared when I heard that same bedlam ghost muttering and bellowing along below. I stared down and saw the strood—it had to be the same one—rippling across the street and pausing there. I was sure it was looking up at me, though it had no eyes.

The strood was still waiting as I peered out of the hotel lobby. For a second, I wished I had a gun or some other weapon to hand, but that would only have made me feel better, not be any safer. I went back inside and walked up to the automaton behind the hotel desk.

Without any ado, I said, "I was translocated here from a holding cell, to which I was translocated after running straight into a pathun's personal space."

"Yes," it replied.

"This happened because I was running away from a strood that wants to eat me."

"Yes," it replied.

"Who must I inform about this . . . assault?"

"If your attack upon the pathun had been deliberate, you would not have been released from the holding cell," it buzzed at me.

"I'm talking about the strood's assault on *me*."

Glancing aside, I saw that the creature was now looming outside the revolving doors. They were probably all that was preventing it from entering the hotel. I could hear it moaning.

"Strood do not attack other creatures."

"It stung me!"

"Yes."

"It wants to eat me!"

"Yes."

"It said 'eat you, eat you,'" I said, before I realized what the automaton had just said. "Yes!" I squeaked.

"Not enough to feed strood, here," the automaton told me. "Though Earth will be a good feeding ground for them."

I thought of the thousands of these creatures I had seen here. No, I just didn't believe this! My skin began to crawl as I heard the revolving doors turning, all of them.

"Please summon help," I said.

"None is required." The insectile head swung toward the strood. "Though you are making it ill, you know."

Right then, I think my adrenaline ran down, because suddenly I was hurting more than usual. I turned with my back against the desk to see the strood coming toward me across the lobby. It seemed somehow ragged to me, disreputable, tatty. The pictures of them I'd seen showed larger and more glittering creatures.

"What do you want with me?"

"Eat . . . need . . . eat," were the only words I could discern from the muttering bellow. I pushed away from the desk and set out in a stumbling run for the elevator. No way was I going to be able to manage the stairs. I hit the button just as the strood surged after me. Yeah, great, you're going to die waiting for an elevator. It reached me just as the doors opened behind

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me. One of its stinging tendrils caught me across the chest, knocking me back into the elevator. This seemed to confuse the creature, and it held back long enough for the doors to draw closed. My chest grew numb and my breathing difficult as I stabbed buttons, then the elevator lurched into progress, and I collapsed to the floor.

"Technical Acquisitions" was a huge disc-shaped building, like the bridge of the starship *Enterprise* mounted on top of a squat skyscraper. Nigel kept Julia, Lincoln, and myself constantly on camera, while Pierce kept panning across and up and down—getting as much of our surroundings as possible. I'd learned that quantity was what they were aiming for; all the artwork was carried out on computer afterward. Pierce—an Asian woman with rings through her lip connected by a chain to rings through her ear, and a blockish stud through her tongue—was the one who suggested it, and Julia immediately loved the idea. I was just glad, after Julia and Nigel dragged me out of the elevator, for the roof taxi to get me out of the hotel without my having to go back through the lobby. Of course, none of them took my story about stroods wanting to eat people seriously; they were just excited about the chance of some real in-your-face documentary making.

"Dawson's got a direct line to the head honchos here in the system station," Lincoln explained to me. For "head honchos," read pathuns, who, after their initial show-and-tell on Earth, took no interest in all the consequent political furor. They were physicists, engineers, biologists, and pursued their own interests to the exclusion of all else. It drove human politicians nuts that the ones who had the power to convert Earth into a swiftly dispersing smoke cloud might spend hours watching a slug devouring a cabbage leaf, but have no time to spare to discuss *issues* with the president or prime minister. Human scientists, though, were a different matter, for pathuns definitely leaned toward didacticism. I guess it all comes down to the fact that modern politicians don't really *change* very much, that the inventor of the vacuum cleaner changed more people's lives than any number of Thatchers or Blairs. Dawson was the chief of the team of human scientists aboard the system base, learning at the numerous feet of the pathuns.

"We get to him, and we should be able to get a statement from one of the pathuns—he's their blue-eyed boy, and they let him get up to all sorts of stuff," Lincoln continued. "According to our researchers, he's even allowed access to curiol matrix tech."

In the lobby of the building, Lincoln shmoozed the insectile receptionist with his spiel about the documentary he was doing for the Einstein channel, then spoke to a bearded individual on a large phone screen. I recognized Dawson right away, because my own viewing had always leaned toward that channel Lincoln and Julia had denigrated on our way out here. He was a short plump individual, with a big grey beard, grey hair, and very odd-looking orangish eyes. He's the kind of physicist who pisses off many of his fellows by being better at pure research than they, and then making it worse by being able to turn his research to practical and profitable ends. While many of them had walked away from CERN with wonderfully obscure papers to their names, he'd walked away with the same,

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plus a very real contribution to make to quantum computing. I didn't hear the conversation, but I was interested to see Dawson gazing past Lincoln's shoulder directly at me, before giving the go-ahead for us to come up.

How to describe the inside of the disk? There were benches, computers, and big plasma screens, macrotech that looked right out of CERN, people walking, talking, waving light pens, people gutting alien technology, scanning circuit boards under electron microscopes, running mass spectrometer tests on fragments of exotic metal. . . . On Earth, there was a lot of alien technology knocking about, and a lot of it turned to smoking goo the moment anyone tried to open it up. It's not that they don't want us to learn; it's just that they don't want us to depopulate the planet in the process. Here, though, things were different: under direct pathun supervision, the scientists were having a great time.

Lincoln and Julia began by asking Dawson for an overview on everything that he and his people were working on. My interest was held for a while as he described materials light as polystyrene and tough as steel, a micro tome capable of slicing diamonds, and nanotech self-repairing computer chips, but, after a while, I began to feel really sick, and without my assister frame, I'd have been on the floor. Finally, he was standing before pillars with hooked-over tops, gesturing at something subliminal between them. When I realized he was talking about curiol matrices, my interest perked up, but it was then that Lincoln and Julia went in for the kill.

"So, obviously the pathuns trust you implicitly, or are you treated like a strood?" asked Julia.

I stared at the subliminal flicker, and through it to the other side of the room, where it seemed a work bench was sneaking away while no one was watching—until I realized that I was seeing a pathun sauntering across, all sorts of equipment on its back.

"Strood?" Dawson asked.

"Yes, their pets," interjected Lincoln. "Ones whose particularly carnivorous tastes the pathuns seem to be pandering to."

I tracked the pathun past the pillars to a big equipment elevator. Took a couple of pulls on one of my inhalers—not sure which one, but it seemed to help. I thought that I was imagining the bedlam moaning. Everything seemed to be getting a little fuzzy around the edges.

"Pets?" said Dawson, staring at Lincoln as if he'd just discovered a heretofore-undiscovered variety of idiot.

"But then I suppose it's all right," said Julia, "if the kind of people fed to them are going to die anyway."

Dawson shook his head, then said, "I was curious to see what your angle would be—that's why I let you come up." Now he turned to me. "Running into a pathun's curiol matrix wasn't the best idea—it reacted to you rather than the strood."

It came up on the equipment elevator, shimmering and flowing out before the observing pathun. The strood came round the room toward me. There were benches to my left, so the quickest escape route for me was ahead and left to the normal elevators. I hardly comprehended what Dawson was saying. You see, it's all right to be brave and sensible when you're whole and nothing hurts, but when you live with pain shadowing

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your every step, and the big guy with the scythe is just around the corner, your perspective changes.

"It bonded and you broke away," he said. "Didn't you study your orientation? Can't you see it's in love?"

I ran, and slammed straight into an invisible web between the two pillars—a curiol matrix Dawson had been studying. Energies shorted through my assister frame, and something almost alive connected to my gilst and into my brain. Exoskeletal energy, huge frames of reference, translocation, reality displayed as formulae . . . there is no adequate description. Panicked, I just saw where I didn't want to be, and strove to put myself somewhere else. The huge system base opened around me, up and down in lines and surfaces and intersection points. Twisting them into a new pattern, I put myself on the roof of the world. My curiol retained air around me, retained heat, but did not defend me from harsh and beautiful reality; in fact, it amplified perception. Standing on the steel plain, I saw that Jupiter was truly vast but finite, and that through vacuum the stars did not waver, and that there was no way to deny the depths they burned in. I gasped, twisted to a new pattern, found myself tumbling through a massive swarm of mugulls, curiols reacting all around me and hurling me out.

It's in love.

Something snatched me down, and, sprawled on an icy platform, I observed a pathun, linked in ways I could not quite comprehend to vast machines rearing around me to forge energies of creation. The curiol gave me a glimpse of what it meant to have been in a technical civilization for more than half a million years. Then I understood about huge restraint. And amusement. The pathun did something then, its merest touch shaking blocks of logic into order, and something went *click* in my head.

Eat you! Eat you!

Of course, everything I had been told was the truth. No translator problem; just an existential one. What need did pathuns have for lies? I folded away from the platform and stumbled out from the other side of the pillars, shedding the curiol behind me. Momentarily doubt nearly had me stepping back into the matrix as the strood flowed round and reared up before me: a raggedy and bloody curtain.

"Eat," I said.

The strood surged forward, stinging cells clacking. The pain was mercifully brief as the creature engulfed me, and the black tide swamped me to the sound of Julia shouting, "Are you getting this! Are you getting this!"

Three days passed, I think, then I woke in a field of daisies. I was about six kilos lighter, which was unsurprising. One of those kilos was pieces of the cybernetic assister frame scattered in the grass all around me. Nearby the strood stood tall and glittering in artificial sunlight: grown strong on the cancer it had first fallen in love with then eaten out of my body, as was its nature. It's like pilot fish eating the parasites of bigger fish—that kind of existence: mutualism. I had been sent as a kind of test case, by the mugulls who were struggling with human sickness, and, after me, the go-ahead was given. The strood are now flocking in their thousands to Earth: come to dine on our diseases. ○

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ECHOING

James Van Pelt

In addition to *Asimov's*, James Van Pelt's work has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies, including *Analog*, *Talebones*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, and *Realms of Fantasy*. One of his most recent stories for us, "The Last of the O-Forms" (September 2002), was a finalist for a Nebula award this year. We will be publishing a sequel to that tale soon. Mr. Van Pelt's story collection, *Strangers and Beggars*, received the American Library Association's designation as a Best Book for 2003. Information about the author can be found at *http://www. sff.net/people/james.van.pelt*.

The semi's engine roared steadily while the heater poured warmth on Laird's ankles. His headlights cut into the snowstorm, flakes coming hard. He rubbed his eyes and stifled a yawn. There hadn't been another truck or car for the last hour on the long stretch of I-25 between Trinidad and Albuquerque, but he wasn't surprised. Christmas Eve in a snowstorm, who would be moving then?

The road unfolded. No tracks. Every twenty seconds or so he passed a highway reflector on his right. He moved the truck closer to the middle, or at least what he hoped was the middle. Snow dove from the darkness, slashing straight toward him, blindingly white. His knuckles ached from gripping the steering wheel. It had started snowing when he'd pulled out of Denver after dinner, soft at first, and glowing in the late afternoon light. The radio had played an instrumental medley of carols. Laird hummed along, thinking about his family waiting in Albuquerque. After he checked the shipment in at the warehouse, he would climb into his car and drive home in plenty of time to be awakened by the kids. Denver to Albuquerque: eight hours on a good night.

Laird downshifted, but the snow swept in just as hard, erasing distance. Sometimes it didn't look like snow coming toward him; it looked more like streaks of darkness exploding from a black center, wiping out the white. He blinked and shook his head. If this were a normal storm on any other night, he could find a pullout, park the truck and sleep until dawn, but the last weather report he'd heard said highways were closing

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behind him. They'd stopped traffic between Denver and Colorado Springs twenty minutes after he'd traveled that route. "Looks like our first big winter storm, folks," the DJ said.

Laird twiddled the radio dial. Nothing but static now. Most times he picked up stations the whole way.

Last year a trucker froze to death in a pullout thirty miles from Taos. No CB, just like him. No cell phone. The storm closed the road, and two days later when the plows broke through, they found him wrapped in a sleeping bag in his truck's cabin. Laird hunched over the steering wheel. They weren't going to find him like that because he wasn't going to stop. Nothing would prevent him from getting home to his kids.

Still, the snow shot from the darkness. When he switched on his brights, it was worse. He thought about being alone, about the long distance. What if, he thought, the snow wasn't snow at all, but stars? What if I were flying through the galaxy, passing stars. . . .

. . . passing stars? Watch Commander Tremaine shook his head. For a moment the flying stars in the viewvid made him think of snow, but he hadn't seen snow for the last third of his life. What he'd seen instead, between long sleeps, were representations of stars scooting through the wall-covering viewvid during the long journey from one edge of the galaxy to the other, 100,000 light years, past one hundred billion stars at 2,000 times the speed of light.

He checked the [M]-space figures again. This couldn't be right! He refigured them. The ship didn't know where it was. Through the mental interface the computer wailed, scared into incoherence. Some time while he'd been sleeping, they'd been thrown off course. Stars zipped by. Some swelled, became perceptibly larger. How close were the stars coming? The ship was off course! Tremaine shuddered. Even in [M]-space, they could not go *through* a star. The collision would create a spectacular display, denot only stroying the star, but swallowing up its neighbors. The ship was supposed to slip *between* the stars. Their course had been designed for that. The passengers slumbering in the long-sleep cots in the holds depended on that, and so did he. After the long trip was done, he would find a place in the cots himself for the return voyage home where his family waited.

He broke open the emergency console, concentrating on the scores of steps necessary to slow the ship, to bring it below light speed where it could recalibrate itself. Be calm, he thought to the computer, and its keening voice silenced for the moment. Tremaine didn't look up. He watched his hands instead. Anything so he wouldn't see the cascading stars. He could almost hear them: deep gravitational wells and surging gases compressed to unimaginable density at their cores. They hissed in his imagination as they went by. As he worked, he wondered if the star that would kill them all would be visible. Might he have a chance to see it, appearing as small as the others at first, then growing out and out in the vidview's display as the computer scrambled to keep up with the data it was representing? Would he have time to flinch?

He'd quit working. His gaze locked on the viewvid. Stars appeared from nowhere, still at first, picking up speed as they moved from the center.

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His eye caught on one, followed it until it vanished to his left. Picked up another, followed it too, until it missed. A beautiful representation, if it weren't so dangerous. Of course, if he really could look out a window, he wouldn't see anything. Light in [M]-space wasn't light anymore. Nothing his senses could respond to existed in [M]-space, and what he thought of as the ship's movement was only a metaphor for what was happening. His understanding of [M]-space itself was metaphoric. It changed reality and the perception of reality. Still, the computer showed him a starfield, the ship rushing forward, a thousand near misses a minute.

Tremaine breathed hard. What would it be like to see one appear and never move, only grow? He felt like a child for an instant, staring forward, mesmerized. The sense that he was someone else, someone younger, a girl, gripped him. He shook his head. What if just for once, the screen changed. . . .

. . . the screen changed. Brianna flinched. For a second the pixels spreading to the edge of the screen didn't look like pixels to her anymore: not plain white specks on a flat black background (her dad's seventeen-inch flat-screen monitor), but glowing, moving, three-dimensional diamonds, and the black wasn't screen-black; it was palpable black. She let go of the monitor, then fell back into Dad's leather office chair. For a second, she'd been someone else: a man, panicked at a console, afraid, so afraid. Afraid of what? Brianna breathed hard in the dark room. Through the closed door she could hear the Christmas party. Aunt Agnes sang something off key. Her brother, Ray, played the piano in accompaniment. He was so much better than Agnes that he made her almost sound good.

Brianna rubbed her eyes. She played the screen-saver game often. Once after smoking some of Ray's stash. Once when she'd snuck home from school to miss a sophomore English test on *Julius Caesar.* Mostly when she wanted to get away. Her therapist had asked her once what her personal motto was. "Everyone has a motto. It's what guides them in how they behave in the world. Mine is 'Make everything right.' I struggle with that," said the therapist, a perky woman who rubbed her cheek when she paused between words. Brianna wondered if the cheek ever became chapped. "So what's *your* motto, Brianna?"

Without thinking, Brianna said, "Ignore them, and they'll go away." And what she thought was, it's about isolation. It's about not connecting to anyone or anything, like Sylvia Plath who wrote a poem describing her stay in a hospital after a suicide attempt. Plath liked the sterility of the room. She despaired when friends brought her flowers because they broke up the porcelain and steel solace of white walls and shiny, tiled floors. Brianna loved that poem. "I'm an eyeball on a pillow," said Brianna to the silent screen, "just observing." Plath tried an overdose to kill herself. Brianna rested her hand on the drawer in her Dad's desk where she'd put the baggie full of barbiturates. Light blue capsules with pink logos. Ten times more than the job required.

The door to the study opened behind her. Brianna pulled her arms close, hiding in the office chair. The door closed. She'd already taken a dozen pills. If they found her now, it would be too soon. The pills' acrid bite lingered in the back of her throat.

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"I don't know where she is," said her father. "She's going to miss the eggnog."

Brianna sighed in relief. If it wasn't the eggnog, it would be the popcorn balls, and if it wasn't that, it would be the Christmas video. Probably *It's a Wonderful Life* again or *White Christmas*, which wasn't nearly as good as *A Muppet's Christmas Carol* which they never watched, even though she asked for it every year.

On the screen, the stars seemed different again, sweeping away from the vanishing point in the monitor's center. Brianna leaned forward. The room felt cold, her chair rigid, and the stars came too fast, too fast by half. She gasped for breath. It couldn't be the pills working already. She'd just taken them. The screen game was about going somewhere else, leaving her life, but it had never *worked* so well. These weren't pixels. They weren't even stars anymore. She cocked her head to the side. What were they? Snow? Her breath came out in a visible plume. Was a window open? That couldn't be it, or she would be freezing. For a second she could feel a winter coat on her arms, her hands gripped a steering wheel, her foot reached forward to find a brake petal. There was too much speed. It was dangerous. She had to slow down. Where was the brake. . . ?

. . . where was the brake? Laird pressed so slowly. The wheel squirmed under his hands. It must be pure ice beneath the snow, and his headlights didn't show what waited on either side. Ditch or cliff, it didn't matter; the shoulder that would grip his tires and send him into a deadly jackknife threatened more. Gently he pumped the brake. A reflector appeared on his right, so he was on the highway—for a second he hadn't been sure—and he still could be home for Christmas morning, but he'd have to be oh so careful. The speedometer needle crept downward: thirty miles per hour, twenty-five, twenty. He downshifted, letting the clutch creep out so as not to break the tires' traction with the road. Now the snow swirled, no longer diving toward his windshield, but twisting in the headlights. The snow wasn't that deep. No more than a few inches. If he could make his way from reflector to reflector, he could find his way home.

His watch said 3:30. Five hours until dawn. At this speed he'd make Albuquerque by . . . he checked his watch again. How long ago had he gone through Trinidad? He remembered the lights at the edge of town, blurred by the whirling storm, and Raton Pass, he was pretty sure . . . yes, Raton Pass for sure, but had he made Maxwell yet? It was only another twenty-five miles or so. Had he gone through? He shook his head. Surely he had. But what was the last exit he'd seen? So many little towns off the highway: Springer and Colmor, Levy and Wagon Mound. He knew he hadn't reached Wagon Mound yet.

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Laird leaned forward, pressing his chest against the wheel, close to the windshield. I-25 was a broad road, clearly marked. There was no way he could be lost, but he thought about the way exit lanes curved off so gradually, and they were lined with reflectors too. Could he be heading away from Albuquerque? He tried to picture the map. What if he'd taken the Springer exit without realizing it, and he was headed east now instead of south? No way to tell, and nobody would know where he'd gone. If only he'd pass a sign, a lighted building, a marker of any kind.

He thought, should I stop? At least now I'm still on the road. The engine will idle for twelve or thirteen hours. Plenty of heat. Surely someone will come along before then. (But what if this isn't I-25? What if I've lost the interstate and this is state highway 56? Eighty miles of empty back road that never gets plowed.)

He stretched away from the wheel. The backs of his arms hurt, and he realized his jaw was clenched. What can you do if you're lost except to press on and look for a landmark? Through the steering wheel, he could feel the road, still slicker than slick. . . .

. . . Watch Commander Tremaine wiped the sweat off his forehead, slicker than slick. The ship was slowing. He imagined the eddy of [M]-space behind them, like a boat's wake, spreading evenly from their passage, washing up against the stars. The psychic disruption wouldn't matter. Life was so rare that a million systems wouldn't feel the ripple, but he'd never heard of a ship slowing as fast as he was slowing his. Tortured reality could be catching up to them now. He watched his hands. Were they blurring at the edges? He glanced up. The stars weren't coming toward him anymore; they gyrated in their paths, curving randomly. [M]-space *was* catching them. How could he trust anything he saw or did? Even his thoughts could become scattered, the neurons flowing unpredictably. The confusion was already there: for an instant he thought he was a young girl; for a blink he was driving down a long, snowy road. Or was it confusion? Could he be close to a world with sentient life, connecting to them through the no-space of faster-than-light travel? Causality stripped away. Trembling [M]-space turning distance into concepts no farther apart than two thoughts.

He pictured the passengers, helpless in their cots. What dreams could [M]-space's backwash cause them? Would they sense his fear? Would that be the last thing they knew, his fear quivering on disaster's edge? How could he find their way home?

Tremaine held a sob close in his throat. He didn't have to see the controls to slow the ship. He'd trained through the procedure a thousand times. He let his reflexes take over. Fear didn't matter if he kept moving. But the ship would know that he was scared. It would respond.

Now the starfield slowed, or maybe his perceptions speeded up? No, no, they had to be going slower now; he'd completed so many steps. He closed his eyes. Just feel my hands, he thought. Fingers on controls. Push this one. Slide this one over. Listen to the calibrations reset. I want to go home. Everything must be done right so I can go home. Where am I?

Through the mental interface, Tremaine felt the computer struggle. A

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trillion stars! It needed an orientation, a landmark, a point of view to start a search. How long would it cast about in its memory trying to find a match? Laird could grow old and die while it sorted through the images, the old star charts.

Tremaine imagined his wife, a tall woman waiting at the edge of the woods where they'd met. At night they looked at the stars, and in the day everything was green. He could smell trees, so pungent, green on green, he could smell it, and there was music. . . .

. . . playing behind the closed office door. Brianna opened her eyes. The feeling she was someone else possessed her so strongly, she nearly threw up. Ray had switched to "Angels We Have Heard on High." Strong bass line countering the melody. He held the high notes before dramatically entering the chorus. The room smelled of pine. Dad had bought a real tree this year, and no matter where she went she couldn't escape the resiny odor.

"I'm not lost," whispered Brianna. "If I open the door, I'll be home. That's all I have to do. I'm home now."

But that wasn't the lost that she felt. With her eyes closed she'd broken contact with Earth, for a second, as if she'd been cut loose and was spinning. "Where is the galactic center?" she'd thought. She clenched her fists. On her fingertips she could still feel the dials and levers and touch pads of what . . . a ship . . . a slippery road without a landmark . . . and there was something about [M]-space (she almost giggled at the sound of the term), but where am I? This is *way* out of control. What would my therapist think of this?

There is an answer, she thought. Her hand crept toward the desk drawer. There's no confusion in the baggie. But her motion stopped when she touched the handle. In the room beyond, they sang, *Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing o'er the plains, And the mountains in reply, echoing their joyous strains*. She leaned toward the monitor. The stars had stopped moving, or at least they were moving very slowly now. What did the screen saver represent? All the times she'd looked at it, she'd only thought about where she was going, never about where she'd come from. What star had she started from? Where was she? (A tiny voice said, "Yes, where are you?" and she felt again the panic of the man at the console. "I need to know where you are.")

Brianna shook off the sleepiness growing in her. The room seemed so dreamlike. It was the drug spilling into her like ink in water, spreading away, darkening the center. Languidly, she touched the enter button, and the screen saver blinked off. She chose her encyclopedia program. Typed in "Milky Way." A schematic flickered into focus on her monitor, spiral arms spinning away from the thickened blob of a middle, a little arrow pointing to a place halfway out on one of arms, closer to the edge than the middle. "You are here," it said, and Brianna took a deep breath. "I am here," she said. She switched to a picture of the night sky, the Milky Way, like light leaking around the edge of a closed door. . . .

. . . Where am I? thought Laird. The truck barely moved now. His heater worked better at seventy miles an hour. At this speed he had to wipe frost off the windshield with his coat sleeve. It would be so easy to stop, but he

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had another vision: his truck parked not at the side of the highway, but in the middle. What if another truck, later in the night when things had cleared a little, came barreling down the road? It wouldn't have time to swerve when the bulk of his truck loomed up through the snow. But I want to stop. He was so tired that he didn't trust what he saw in the headlights. Fantastic shapes forming in the drifting flakes. Faces. He tried to think of his family, his wife, his son, his daughter, but they seemed so far away. They were the dream. Endless snow, a cold that bit through his coat, that numbed the backs of his legs, that was reality. He thought about hypothermia, dementia, the end of reason. There's rest, he thought, in a bag full of blue pills with pink logos.

Laird punched his leg hard with a closed fist. The pain, for an instant, felt good. Cleared his head. What was that thought about pills? He could see them, resting in a desk drawer, Christmas piano playing in the background. I'm in trouble, he thought. She's in trouble too. She's *stopped*, parked in the middle, waiting to freeze.

He punched his leg hard, twice, twisting his fist when he did to sharpen the sting. It's just a road, and I'm a few miles from *somewhere*, if I can keep going, but within minutes the snow ceased to be snow again: it fashioned itself into hands reaching to get him, into the backs of monsters blocking the road. Vertigo gripped him, and an impression that he was falling straight down instead of driving forward surprised a scream out of him. The storm was a mouth; he saw it open, teeth at the edges, swallowing him and the truck whole, but he couldn't stop. He drove on. *I saw it!* He wept in fear. *Hallucination or not, I saw it!* . . .

. . . Tremaine closed his eyes and opened them again. What had he seen? For an instant, it was there, a schematic of the galaxy, an arrow pointed on one spiral arm. The girl had thought, "You are here," and then he'd seen a photograph of the stars. If he could align what he'd seen, just an approximation, the computer might be able to do the rest. He concentrated on the memory, the gauzy middle of the galaxy, the arrow, the long strands circling away, and the computer watched what he watched. The diagram was such a *rough* location, but the computer hummed contentedly while it worked, because even a rough guess eliminated the near infinite number of wrong choices.

For the first time since Tremaine had realized the ship was off course, he relaxed. The stars in the viewvid weren't moving now, and he wondered which star held the girl with the diagram. In answer to his question, without breaking its rhythm, the computer brightened one dot on the display. Tremaine enhanced the image. A plain star, unremarkable to look at. On further magnification he noticed an unusual ringed planet in the system. That wasn't where she was. Third planet from the sun, almost a double planet, its moon was so large. Maybe if he concentrated, he could send her a thank you, although she'd never know for what. When he tried to see what she saw again, he only saw stars moving, and beneath the stars, a bag full of blue pills with pink logos. No galaxy. No arrow saying, "You are here." On the viewvid he studied the planet's blue face until the computer whistled happily. It had located them. Reluctantly, Tremaine clicked off the display while the computer recalibrated their

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course. I'm going home, he thought. They would be on their way soon, and he had duties. . . .

. . . What duties? thought Laird. Where did that thought come from? All that kept him going was habit, now. Nothing he saw could be trusted. The reflectors, when they came, seemed too far or too near (or too high or the wrong color). Was this hypothermia? He imagined his brain settling into a solidifying jelly, growing colder by the minute. For a second he thought the snow was stars, and he thought he could set a course by them, but now it was just snow again, flying through his headlights.

I could pull off, let the snow pile up. It would be so easy. His hands barely held the wheel, and his eyelids slid closed of their own accord. It's dark in here. So comfortable to fade away into sleep, into dreams where a piano played "Angels We Have Heard on High" and a Christmas tree beyond a closed door smelled of pine resin and popcorn strings and people laughed at a joke he didn't hear.

The truck can recalibrate itself, he thought. But if I keep moving, it will find my way home. . . .

. . . I'm already home, thought Brianna, aren't I? The sense of *home* formed within her, a longing for it. A vision of a forest with a woman someone loved; a Christmas morning so far away, and so wished for. *Home*, like she'd never thought of it before. She reached around her. There were the office chair arms; there was the desk, although it seemed vague, and she was so cold. She wrapped her hands around her arms—the skin was stiff as marble.

How could this be? She gasped. The pills were working. She could bare-

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ly move. After a long struggle, she put her feet on the floor. If she could get out of the office, maybe, and into the other room where it was warm, they could save her.

I'm alone, she thought, and I'm lost. The highway will never end. I'm in snowy hell. Her hands rested on the steering wheel. There was no place to go, only the truck cab stuck in front of clouds of dancing snow. (I'm NOT in a truck—I'm in my dad's office.) The steering wheel's solidity seemed more real than the computer monitor. Frost on the window. The low rumble of the geared-down diesel engine. The accelerator and the clutch, more real than the office carpet beneath her feet. I'm going to sleep, she thought, but I have to get to my family!

. . . my family. Laird forced his eyes open. If he slept, he'd never get home. He imagined opening the front door on Christmas morning. "I'm home," he'd say into the empty room, and there would be a giggle: his son behind the couch, his daughter behind the chair, waiting to surprise him. His wife smiling in the hall, just out of sight.

I've got to get home, he thought. . . .

Yes, said Brianna in the darkness of her dad's office. I've got to wake up. . .

They both hunched forward. Stay focused, they thought. Keep moving. . .

Brianna staggered out of the chair. Braced herself on the desk's edge. She wept with fatigue. . . .

Laird waited for the next reflector. There it was. The speedometer hardly twitched, but he was still going forward. The road ended somewhere, as long as he didn't stop. . . .

How far away was the office door? Brianna couldn't see it. She couldn't see anything now. Why not? The headlights were on. The reflectors marked the road, if she just kept them to her right. (Don't stop now, came the thought through the diesel noise—there's a light ahead.)

There's a light ahead; it came from under the door, where the piano played. . . .

There's a light ahead, beyond the headlights and the crashing snowflakes; it's a gas station next to the highway. . . .

Brianna grabbed the doorknob. It twisted beneath her hand. The door was opening. The light poured in, and the piano played, "Angels We Have Heard on High." Before she entered the room, she thought, how many times has he played that song? Maybe he's played it all night.

She stepped into the light. . . .

. . . light in the darkness. The sign said WAGON MOUND GAS AND CONVENIENCE. Laird edged the truck onto the exit ramp. People sat in the café. He could see them, drinking coffee. Beside the window, under the wreath they'd painted on the glass, waited a phone booth topped by six inches of snow.

He could call his wife.

When he stepped out of the truck, the wind picked up. For a second, the snow came straight at him, unswerving lines, glittering in the parking lot's light, like stars sweeping past a starship. He was a Watch Commander. He was a young girl hoping to escape. In the last tremor of [M]-space, he was the three of them, trying to get home.

Laird beat his hands together against the cold. ❍

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THE ALIEN LIKED TO COOK

The alien often
livened up her food
with some worms
she had brought from
her distant world.
She would drop
a couple of them
into soups simmering
on her stove top.
This revolted
many of us but
we understood she
was an enlightened
being just like us.
She had different
ways but it was
important to realize
they were every bit
as valid as our own.
You humans are so
squeamish, she said.
When her soup was
done she scooped
out the worms.
Both of them were
still crawling and
wriggling despite
their hot bath.
Then the alien
returned them to
their tiny cage.
The secretions from
their hides lend
a divine flavor
to my cooking,
said the alien.
She held up a
wooden spoon,
wet with a puddle
of brownish liquid.
Here, she said.
Taste and you'll see.

—Mario Milosevic

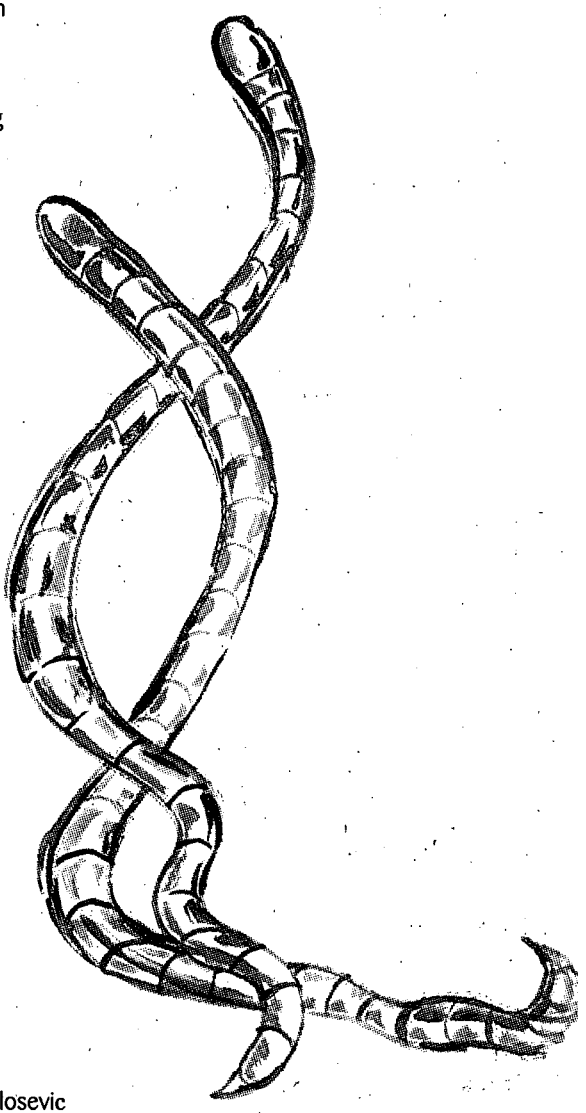

Illustration by June Levine

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A REUNION

Keith Ferrell

Keith Ferrell was editor of *Omni Magazine* and Omni Online from 1990 to 1996. His novel *Passing Judgment* was published late in the last century; another book will be along soon. Much of his recent output has been focused on the upcoming SF online game Fallen Earth <*www.fallenearth.com*>. Working from a thirty-five-acre farm in southwestern Virginia, Mr. Ferrell also writes frequently about technology and science for a variety of publications and encyclopedias.

1

The tory birds had barely cleared the tops of the sentinel trees before Father had the babies in the combat crèche and Mother gave me the shock of my life (to that point) by handing me a gun.

"You're old enough," she said. "Don't use it unless we use ours."

I held it heavy in my hand. It felt like it weighed more than when I used it to hunt with Mother or Father. I checked its charge—not that the charge level made any difference to its weight. Energy doesn't *weigh* anything, yet it is harder to move energy, I think, than to move the heaviest of rocks or pull a fully laden wagon.

The gun I held was the last one the machines had produced before the final shutdown. After that, anything we wanted produced, we had to produce ourselves. The light in the grip told me the gun's charge was *Full-Up*. Keeping the guns charged was just as hard as keeping anything else charged, which was *all* hard since the shutdown. But we would and did go without refrigeration or lights before we let the guns get drained. Lately, we had gone without lights a lot.

Father joined us on the porch, his own gun in his hand. He looked at the one in mine, then looked at me, strong into my eyes. He never did tell me what he saw there, but he looked next at Mother, who nodded, and we turned to face the stand of sentinel trees.

The squawk and screech of the tory birds had not diminished. Some-

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times wingbeasts just went nuts and nothing happened afterward. Sometimes they flurried and it was a meatbeast coming out of the woods and right into the range of my parents' guns. A few times, it had been a preybeast, which Father or Mother killed fast before it could prey on us: *we* were meatbeasts to the preybeasts.

Once, only once so far, it was raiders from the Farback. I had been in the combat crèche with the smaller ones then, and heard little and saw less, but when Mother and Father came to get us, Father was bleeding from his right arm and there were two dead men and a dead woman lying right on the edge of the road. I wasn't very old then, but I was old enough to help bury them behind the garden. Father couldn't shovel much because of his arm. Later that year, I helped my parents bury the youngest of my sisters. We all cried together while we dug the spot for her, a nice spot with flowers, nowhere near the garden where the raiders were buried.

The tory birds weren't even close to settling back down into the branches where they lived, which was a sure sign that what they were screaming about was more than a meatbeast or any other kind of beast. They screamed loudest and longest about *people,* making no distinction between raiders or neighbors—usbeasts all, we stirred them up.

Probably it was neighbors, come to talk or share news. Before the shutdown, you could have person-talk without the person being there, talk between houses and towns and even farther without leaving home. Talk with pictures, too. Since the shutdown, people had to come to each other to talk. Mostly it was neighbors who came. But there had been that one time when it wasn't, and some of our neighbors had seen raiders more than one time. Lots of neighbors were in the ground too, and we had been to some of their buryings. Someday, I would bury Mother or Father, or they would bury me. I knew that much.

The birds were screaming louder now, and Mother put a firm hand on my shoulder. She turned me a little bit to the left. "Over there," she said. "Like we've talked about." There was a rocked-in corner of the porch, the rocks just high enough to kneel behind and shoot. The rocks used to be in the ground where they were meant to be, but now they were part of our house. I went there and dropped down. I wanted to look at Mother and Father, but I knew that I shouldn't look anywhere but at the edge of the woods where the road came out, so I did.

The road used to have lights and the lights used to move cars and carts. Father tells me I should remember that, but I don't. I don't remember much from before the suncatchers went down, the shutdown happened, and the raiders took over the Farback. I was three when the shutdown happened, and that was nine years ago. A long time.

Not as long, all those years, as the next few minutes seemed. It looked to me like the tory birds were flying slower with each second, until I could stare at them and they just stood still in the sky. They were shouting louder than ever, but it sounded to me like the noise was coming from miles away. The air seemed thicker too—harder to breathe in, harder to breathe out. My hand was dripping sweat where I held the gun. I was afraid to put the gun down and dry my hand. As soon as I did, the raiders would come out of the woods.

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But it wasn't raiders who finally came out of the woods, and we knew that before he emerged. We could hear his voice: "Hello the house! Friend! Hello the house!"

I knew that voice, we all did. It was Vargell Fulder, who operated one of the trading places in town, and who had been a friend of the family for a long time.

The birds returned to their normal wheeling speed, the air grew breathable again. I did not lower my gun, any more than Mother or Father lowered theirs. It was Vargell's voice all right, but we had to wait to make sure that he was speaking his own words.

He was. Fat Vargell Fulder sat all alone on the seat of the cart pulled by twin draybeasts instead of lights. He waved to us from the edge of the woods, and gave a hitch to the reins, urging the draybeasts on toward our house. My parents waited until they could see the empty wagonbed before they lowered their guns, and so did I.

Father stepped down to greet Vargell while Mother went to fetch the littler ones from the crèche. I went with Father. Vargell drew his team to a halt right in front of us. He was sweating hard. The tory birds were beginning to settle back down.

"The gate's open," Vargell said to my father. "The gate opened up today. They've come back!"

2

I thought he meant the raiders who had caused the shutdown. I thought that he meant *they* had come back through the gate in space.

Father must have thought the same thing for he said, "We'll need a little time. To prepare a few things before we come—"

But Vargell was shaking his head, wheezing more than a little, giving that coughing laugh of his. "Not *raiders,* no. It's your *brother,* man—it's *our people*. Terry him*self*. Come back to us up there." He looked high in the sky, then pointed there. Some drops of sweat scattered from his beard when he jerked his head to look up. "It's *our* people who're back!"

Mother was coming toward us with the littlest ones in her arms, and she heard what Vargell said. She staggered a little, a few stumbling steps, then stopped and slowly put the little ones down on the grass. She stood up but did not take another step. She was looking at Father.

I looked at him too, surprised to see that he was crying. Not weeping, not sobbing—I had seen him and Mother weep and sob when we buried my little sister. He was just crying now, slow tears on his wide cheeks. Mother wasn't actually crying, but her eyes were bright. Vargell wiped his own eyes, then leaned and honked runny snot from his nose.

"You're sure?" Father said to Vargell

"Sure as shutdown," Vargell, which meant *very* sure. There was nothing more certain in our lives than the shutdown. "No person-talk from them yet, only metalbeasts, sendaheads come first and faster, to bring the satellites back."

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Father looked up and I looked in the same direction.

"Must have gotten there some days ago," Vargell was saying while we still looked at the sky. "Some of the machines at the landing site waked up this morning and got to work on the others. It'll take longer for the person-ships to fall in from the gatestation, but they will be here. It *has* to be your brother. Who else could it be? Who else *would* it be?"

"Terry," Father said.

I did not remember my uncle. I had only seen a picture of him once, two years ago when Father decided that our catchers had caught enough sunlight to divert some to a viewer. Mother and Father said that when I was a baby I loved the viewers, and would sit before them for hours at a time, watching. Sometimes I thought I could remember the views I liked the best, but most times I could not. Other than that one time, we had not had a viewing since the shutdown. Father and Mother worked on the catchers all the time, and managed to keep them catching most of the time, but there was never enough extra light to run a viewer.

The thick afternoon of Vargell's news, though—it was the edge of the hot season, cloudless for weeks already and as it would be for weeks to come—we all sat in front of the smallest of our viewers while Father fiddled with the wire he ran from the sunstore, where light was held until its power was needed. At last, he stepped back and smiled at Mother. She pressed a button.

The viewer came to life slowly, like the sun coming up on a foggy morning. I didn't blink or breathe, I didn't want to miss a moment of the dawning images.

Before Father put power to the viewer, he and Mother had powered the knowstore, and made selections from what it held, selections that now appeared on the screen.

First came something we had only had described to us—a view of our world from the gatestation above it. The world looked like a ball, the way Father and Mother had told us it looked. But I had never seen so beautiful a ball, or one that simply floated without falling. Sparkling around it were the suncatchers, floating too in their places, capturing light and sending it down to power our homes and tools, to power our lives.

They still hung there, of course, above us. Mother and I sometimes looked at them on clear nights, small lights moving through the dark sky, but catching nothing since the shutdown. Catching nothing—and sending less.

The image of the world did not last long—not long enough!—and gave way to a view of the landing site, but not the way I have always known the site, vast but still, everything-in-place unchanging from one day to the next, the ships and vehicles and robots standing precisely where they'd stood when the shutdown struck.

This site in the viewer was the same site, but not the same site at all. Everything was moving. Even as we watched, a ship came down from above, and settled gently into its berth. Vehicles made their ways among the ships—there must have been a dozen of them, instead of the four that have stood motionless throughout my memory—loading and unloading people and cargo. Robots rolled and walked and tractored among them as

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well, metalbeasts on the move. I had never seen a robot in motion, and, again, felt sad when the image changed.

My sadness passed as quickly as it had come, carried away by pictures of vehicles moving along the roadway—moving without being pulled by draybeasts. Mother and Father tell me often that I loved nothing more than going with them for rides in our own vehicle, into town, or to visit a neighbor, or just along the routes the roadway followed.

I didn't remember that, but I *wanted* to—the pictures moving across our viewer made me wish that I recalled how it felt to travel in one of those vehicles. On the screen, Mother was steering, and, for a moment, I was once more in Father's lap. Father had no beard!

We were a smaller family, but we could do more things. We could *ride*. And the same captured light that let us ride also let us light our homes and heat and cool our food and water, brought robots to life, and made pictures move. The light powered things that built *other* things, more than could be counted, Mother sometimes said. With captured light, machines and metalbeasts could do almost anything, an endless number of other things, all of which I had only heard about. I could imagine them, but I could not remember them. Most of them were things usbeasts were *not meant to do*. What was all right for machines was wrong for we. I did not completely understand that, either.

The viewer consumed the last of its imprisoned light. Light is the *only* thing that it is right to capture, and, perhaps for that very reason, it is easiest for light to escape its imprisonment and get away.

The image flickered, the screen dimmed. The ride stopped.

Father glanced at the sunstore. "No lights tonight," he said softly.

Mother placed a hand on his shoulder. "They're back," she said, loud enough for all of us to hear the joy in her voice. "Soon we'll have light enough for everything."

3

That night, after everyone was asleep, I went outside.

I did not go far from the house, only enough distance to see around the stream of smoke that rose from the cookfire and the smokepit. As they did every evening when there was no stored sunlight, Mother and Father had set traps and trips and noisemakers to warn of us of any approach that might get past the tory birds. I had helped them, and now I stayed well clear of the alarms' boundaries.

The ground and the grass that covered it were cool beneath my feet, but I was not interested in the ground. I had come outside to look up.

Our world was closing in on dryseason, and already the nights were cloudless, stars and suncatchers shining above me. The stars don't move and neither do the biggest and brightest of the suncatchers. The little ones that are close in on the world move fast across the sky. The big ones, though—there are three of them—are far out from the world and do not ever change their position. Mother has tried to explain this to me, but it's

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hard to understand how something far away can be brighter than something close.

The world where Mother was born has three moons, while ours has only one, and it was hiding tonight. Our moon is bigger than the biggest suncatcher. Mother says there are some worlds that have no moons, and some that have many more than three. It's hard to understand how something as big as a moon can hide itself.

I was glad the moon was keeping to itself. The moon is a sunbouncer that at its brightest can drown out the other lights in the sky. It sabsence made it easier to see the suncatchers and the stars beyond them. I pretended that I could see far enough into the night to pick out the gatestation, which was bigger than the suncatchers and half as big as the moon. I couldn't, of course—it floats so far into the night that even a ship as fast as my uncle Terry's would take a dozen or more nights and days to travel from it to our world.

And that made less sense to me than any of the other things I did not understand. The gatestations let ships travel from the worlds of one sun to the worlds of another, and make the trip in no time at all, *none*. No matter how far apart the suns are—and Father explained to me one day that they are *far*—you can go between them faster than you can blink, as long as there's a gatestation at each end.

But once you get to the sunsystem where you are going, you are still not *there*. Gatestations have to be a long way into the night, far and then even farther from the sun and its worlds. You can blink and go from gatestation to gatestation, but then you might as well go to sleep, because it will take some time to get to that sun's worlds. Some worlds, Father told me, are so far from their gatestations that the trip can take months.

It's all bound up with gravity, the sun's and the world's and everything else's. Ships move between the stations in a blink under power they make for themselves, but from the gatestation to the world, they are pulled by slow gravity that gets faster as they get closer. Both Mother and Father have promised me more than once that I could understand gravity and space and gatestations with more study and more time. Maybe so, even though I already understood gravity well enough. You couldn't do what Father and I were doing this dryseason without learning a few things about gravity, and a lot of things about other subjects.

Gatestations were another matter. The raiders' shutdown that closed the gatestation and turned off the suncatchers meant that you had to *go slow* across the *far* between the suns, same as across the *close* between the gatestation and our world. If it took a dozen or more nights and days to go from the gatestation to our world, how slow and how long must Uncle Terry have gone to get from another sun to ours?

High above me something flared fast and brilliant, a bright white line across the sky that vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

I knew what it was: a bit of dust caught by our world's gravity and pulled so close that it fell through the air and was consumed. The dust became energy and light, then became nothing.

I felt dizzy, and told myself it was because I had been looking up for so long.

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But that wasn't it.

It was gravity.

I lowered my eyes, and waited until the dizziness passed before going back inside.

4

Despite staying out so late the night before, I woke up early and hurried out of bed and into my clothes. This was a workday—Father and I would be going to our dam.

It wasn't a dam yet, but it was closer to being one than to not being one. We had passed that point eight or nine days ago, and I at least had not even known we were approaching such a point. But when I turned at the end of a day's work, as I always turned, for one more look at what Father and I had accomplished, I saw something new.

Not just two half-walls of stone, one on either side of the deep channel's shallow flow that our stream became as dryseason approached, but now something more. Except in one place, where we had put a boulder bigger than me, our walls were so far no taller than my father's waist, which put their height at about that of my chest—the walls nonetheless gave promise of what they would become, of what they were becoming. Even though it was really *not meant to be*.

It seemed a long time since the morning we had gathered as a family and wailed our worship at what we were about to commit, our prayers that we be forgiven for imprisoning the waters of the stream.

At that time of year, and for another half-year at least, our stream ran no deeper than my father's shins, my knees. A year before, the water would have reached my thighs, but I had been growing. A year before, I was too small to have been much help to Father, but now he said I was big enough to help and old enough to learn.

We got started as rainfall winter began to dwindle. Rain fell on our heads as we prayed before moving the first rock. As I said the worship words, I could hear the stream, even at a distance. The stream became a river that roared during rainseason, loud, powerful, scary. If I stepped into the water, it would sweep me away, and the current looked strong enough to sweep Father away, too. Once, watching the stream after it had become a winter river, I saw a draybeast—and it was a big one—bounce by, dead and bloody from the rocks it had hit. It would be bloodier by the time it reached the waterfall that tumbled down at the end of the channel.

Father says that when the dam is finished, the stream won't roar any more, even in the heaviest of rainseasons. We have wailed together over the guilt we carry for making nature's roar go quiet and for making the water stop flowing. The river will back up into the valley that leads to the deep cut where we are building our dam. When the water backs up enough, we will have a small lake within an easy walk of our house. Father promised that we would build a boat next year and that he would

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teach me how to sail it. Once the dam was finished and the valley filled with water, the tiny shiny fishbeasts that darted through the stream would grow larger. Next year, Father said on the very first day of our work, we would be able to go fishing together on the water whose flow we have trapped.

We talked about things like that as we worked on our dam. It helped the work go faster, but working with Father would have gone fast even if no words were spoken.

Not all of our talk was about fishing and sailing and other fun. Father, like Mother, made lessons out of work. Many of the lessons at the dam, and during our evenings of planning the dam, and the long soggy work of loading rocks onto the wagon and driving our draybeasts through rainseason mud to the edge of the channel, or, when it was dryer, hitching the draybeasts to bigger rocks with no wagon and pulling them without wheels, *many* of those lessons were about gravity.

My back and shoulders alone could tell you a lot about gravity. Rocks are heavy, and if you drop them, they fall. If they fall on your toes, they *hurt.* Pain is part of the penance for moving them from where they were *meant to be,* or at least it is penance for moving them *badly.*

Twice, Mother showed me that light things and heavy things fall at the same speed. She would not show me again because she knew that I could show myself. I did it several times while moving rocks of different weight from the ground to the wagonbed or back again. That's how I learned about how much toes can hurt.

Gravity is what makes things fall, but it's also what keeps things in place. Keeps them where they are *meant to be.* But even when they're in place, like rocks on the ground, they store inside them the ability to fall if they're picked up and dropped. In a way, they're energystores, the way our sunstores hold the energy of captured light. You can store energy in lots of ways, and our dam is one of them.

Father's and my dam would do the same thing, or close to it, with water. The spot Father selected was a channel that had been cut deep through rock over hundreds of centuries. The top of the channel stood five times higher than my head, and at the point where we were building our dam, the channel was about the same distance across as it was tall.

When she surveyed our site, Mother said that it would be better if the channel was deeper, but she also said that we were going to have enough of a struggle building a dam *this* high and wide. To build one larger would require machines, and to make the machines work we would need the suncatchers. And if we had the suncatchers, we wouldn't need the dam.

Father and I and our draybeasts moved rocks through the mud all winter long. Gravity is bad enough and mud only makes it worse.

As we hauled, Father explained to me what would happen once the dam was built and the water was imprisoned behind it. You didn't have to understand much about energy to see that the rainseason river was filled with it. That energy would not go away if the river was behind a dam. It would just wait until it could be used. Using that energy was the whole point of building the dam.

There would be a hole at the heart of the dam, and a pipe would be run

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through that hole. The top opening of the pipe, its *intake,* would be near the very highest part of the dam. The pipe itself would run all the way down, emerging at an angle and running even father down the streambed, all the way to the waterfall drop, where the pipe would stretch down to the streambasin far below. There, we would build another, smaller stone structure, this one hollow inside.

Or not really hollow, for this structure would hold a machine that the water would run.

Mother was already working on the machine, using parts from the inside of our family's vehicle, the same way father and I used wheels from the vehicle to be wheels on our wagon, but different. Our wheels are wheels, whether on the car or on the wagon we fashioned from sentinel tree lumber. But Mother was hammering and fashioning and altering bits and pieces of metal and wire and plastic from what they had been into tools for doing something *else*. These tools—blades on a spindle, connected to gears and linkages—would transform the energy the water held into energy we could use. Energy that usbeasts can use is called *power*.

To do that, the water would have to be guided to the blades, and our pipe would do that. The pipe would guide, but gravity would move the water, just as gravity guides the light through the universe.

For light flows outward from the sun in rivers of energy that the catchers would trap, and divert, and convert for our uses, sending their imprisoned sunstreams down to us and our floating and planet-bound suncatchers and from there to be held in our sunstores. The lake behind the dam will be a waterstore, but it will be an energystore too.

And it would be ours, built by usbeasts, Father and Mother and me.

5

Waiting in the early morning light for Father and Mother to awaken was hard. I wanted to go to work right *then*. But I had promised Father and Mother that I would never go near the dam by myself, even in the driest of seasons. Just yesterday, they had given me a gun to help defend our home, but they were afraid that I would be hurt if I went to the streambed alone. Things could happen, they said: A heavy stone could fall on my head, a preybeast could prey upon me, raiders from the Farback could appear to kill me or spirit me away. I was not to go there alone.

I had obeyed them so far, and I would not break their rules this morning. My eagerness to get to work burned like hunger in my stomach. I tried to ignore it as I quietly dressed and then returned to my bed. But the excitement still gnawed at me.

It wasn't just the work itself that I was eager for, although that was the most of it. I learned something new, and often more than one new skill, every day at the dam. Nor was it even the doing of the work side-by-side with Mother or Father or both of them, although that was much of the rest. It was the *other* new, too, the *new* new—the new people, including my uncle, who soon would see what Father and Mother and I had built.

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Mother says that it is no good thing to boast or show off, but I did not consider my pride in the dam to be boastful. I simply wanted the new people to see *what could be done* rather than what I had done or even what *we* had done. At least I thought that was what I wanted, and thought that the desire was not prideful or boastful. I promised myself that I would ask Father about it when we were at the dam later that morning.

I did not ask him that day, nor have I, nor will I.

I have not asked him or Mother *anything* since the first furious flurry of questions that were torn loose from me when they rose the morning after Vargell Fulder's visit with the wonderful news.

Hearing them stirring at last, I played the little trick that had long-since ceased to fool anyone, but had been for so long so much a part of our workday mornings that the day would have seemed incomplete without it: I pulled the covers over my clothing and tucked them beneath my chin, closed my eyes, and made my chest rise and fall in steady, sleeping rhythm. When I heard the door to my room slide slowly open, I did not open my eyes even the tiniest bit, but thought—*remembered!*—for an instant that our doors once possessed the ability to open themselves. My memory could see and hear it: approach a door, and it would slide open for you to pass through, then close itself behind you. I wondered if the energy from our dam would be enough to bring our doors back to life.

Fast as the memory came, it was gone, a door sliding shut. I felt Father's fingers against my ribs, tickling. Sometimes it was Father, other times Mother, occasionally both, always tickling—especially in the hard days just after the shutdown, when Father and Mother worked extra hard to give us smiles and make us laugh. This morning, I was already happy, but I laughed loud anyway.

I let the tickling continue for another moment, then opened my eyes wide and flung back the covers. Father jumped back, pretending surprise.

"Fooled you!" I said, as he clapped his hands together.

"You always do," he said, not for the first time. "Now hurry, we've got things to do." He left to wake the others. The door stayed open behind him.

I got my heavy shoes on quickly, tied them tight for the day's work. When I reached the kitchen, Father was already there with the babies. Mother was busy at the long table, arranging food to be packed into two large baskets. I felt a small surge of sadness—we were *all* going to the dam, babies too, and that meant that less work would get done. The last time we had all gone, Father and Mother did the work and I had to care for the babies. I did not want that to happen again, but I kept my face smiling and made my smile even wider when Mother looked in my direction.

"The good clothes," she said, her own smile as large as any I had ever seen. "Didn't your father say?"

I said nothing.

"We're going to town! He should have told you. Go put on your good clothes."

"But—"

"Good clothes *now*," she said. Her smile got smaller.

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I did not care: keeping my own smile in place hurt. "The dam. We have work."

"No," she said, but her voice was soft. She smiled wide at me again but I did not care about that, either. "That work is *done* now. We don't have to do that sort of work any more, and never will again. Hurry! We're going to town."

I did not move and it may have been that I *could* not move. I can't remember. "It's *not* done," I said.

Mother's voice got sharp. "Hush now. You go and change your clothes. We're leaving soon—"

The whole house flickered then, for just an instant, bright lights and sudden sounds, doors sliding partway open or shut on their own before they stopped again, the lights gone and the sounds silenced as suddenly as they'd come.

Mother dropped her knife.

"Already?" Father said. The littlest of the babies made laughing sounds.

"So *soon?*" Mother said. "I didn't expect it so soon."

"Expect what?" I said, the first of the last questions I would ever ask my parents.

Mother bent to pick up her knife, and, kneeling, looked at me. Her face seemed filled with light from the inside, the same sort of light that had flashed through our home. "The suncatchers," she said, and cast her eyes toward the ceiling but I knew she meant higher than that. "They came back."

"How?"

"Your uncle and the others," Father said. He held the baby high over his head, toward the ceiling where brief light had just shined.

"How?" I said again.

"We'll find out in town," Father said, twirling with the baby still overhead. "And the sooner you change clothes, the sooner we can *go!*"

6

It did not take me long to change, although I could have been quicker about it. Father and Mother knew that, but neither of them said anything. Town clothes were softer than work clothes, but they were somehow less comfortable. My workclothes fit me like another skin. Town clothes felt like they belonged to someone else.

When I was dressed, I helped Mother hitch our draybeasts to the wagon, but I did not ask any questions while we worked. She was in a hurry: we wailed only briefly at putting harnesses on the draybeasts so that they could do what they had not *been meant to do*. I was not sure what questions to ask next, and Mother's attention kept flickering to the house and the roadway that had themselves flickered.

I rode in the wagonbed with the babies. Mother and Father sat together on the high seat at the front. They wore weapons on their belts, but they had not offered me a gun. I carried the babies' toys, and kept an eye

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on the baskets of food. I thought of the questions I wanted to ask, but the tory birds were screaming, and I waited until we were on the far side of the sentinel tree forest before I spoke.

"How long do we have to stay? Will we be home in time to go to the dam?"

Father laughed. "We won't be home until late, if then. Maybe not tonight at all."

Mother turned to look at me before she spoke. "We won't be going back to the dam until it's dismantled," she said. A bit of a breeze tugged at a bit of her hair. "There's no need."

Father may have understood better than Mother, for he spoke before I could. "We'll take it down together, you and me," he said. "How'll that be?"

"Take it *down?*"

"*Dismantle* it," Mother said. "Do you know what that word means?"

"Take it down," I said again, but not in answer to her.

"Exactly." She patted her hair back from her forehead, then patted Father's arm. "But we won't have to do it ourselves. We *won't* do it ourselves. The power will be back. It's coming back already."

"You're right ,of course," Father said. He looked over his shoulder at me. "She's right, you know. We'll have machines to do the dismantling."

The wagon gave a little bounce and I felt as though it was enough to fling me off the world itself. I had more questions, but I had no voice for them.

Father was still talking to Mother, winking a little conspiracy at me as he said, "We can teach him how to give orders to the robots, can't we? He'll be good at that."

Mother gave the matter some thought. "He might be too young," she said at last, and I did not think she was joining in Father's teasing game.

"We'll see," Father said, and turned his attention back to the team.

I still could not speak. They had given me a gun, but they thought I was too young for the machines. I could kill, but I could not work on our dam any longer. If what they said was true, the dam would get no larger than it already was. It would never be more than what we had made of it, and now it seemed to me that all we had made was two piles of stones. We had plans for the small stone house that we would build, but now that house would never be built.

What would happen to the stones we had moved? What would the machines do with the stones that Father and Mother and I had set in place? We had hauled some of those rocks so far that it took two days to move them to the dam. One was big enough that Father called it a boulder. That one had taken four days early in dryseason, with the draybeasts in harness to the boulder, and Father and Mother and me all pushing behind. When we reached the lip of the channel where the dam was being built, we unhitched the draybeasts and set them to graze nearby. They paid no attention as we set to moving the boulder. The babies were settled on the ground near the draybeasts, and paid more attention to our animals than to us or the work we were doing.

We did it with three long steel bars that Mother had created from the remains of what had been a machine before the shutdown. She called

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them levers, and used them to teach me some things about gravity and energy and the ways we can transform energy into power.

It was *hard* work, putting the points of the levers at just the right places beneath the boulder, and then pushing down on them with all our weight and strength. The boulder moved back and forth—the rock *rocked,* I remember saying, and how Mother and Father laughed. I did not have much weight, but I was strong for what I weighed. More than once, I felt the boulder shift just above the point of my own lever instead of Mother's or Father's with me helping. Feeling that made a strong feeling in my stomach.

We worked at the boulder with our levers for most of the afternoon. The sun was finally beginning to shrink, and Father had said twice that we should quit and get the babies home, when the work was suddenly done.

I did not expect it when it happened, but that did not keep it from happening.

We were pushing against the boulder with our levers and our hands, but we were pushing against the world too. That's part of how levers work, Father had said, our weight and the world's weight and the levers in between. Father worked his lever with his right hand, his left hand flat against the surface of the stone, pushing. Mother and I had both hands on our levers. The metal of mine felt hot, and this time I pushed so hard that I thought it might bend or break.

But it did not. Instead, suddenly, the levers moved the boulder—or moved the world; I have thought about that as well.

I went all the way to the ground, following my lever there. I hit hard enough to hurt, but kept my head up so I could watch what we had done.

Had I looked away, or closed my eyes, or even blinked, I would have missed it.

The boulder seemed to jump away from the ground—or the ground fell away from the boulder. Either way, with no world beneath it, the boulder's energy was changed into motion.

It fell.

Or was pulled, gravity bringing it back to the world to the new place where gravity put it, but where *we* meant for it to be.

By the time I got to my knees and moved to look down into the channel, gravity had done its work as surely as we had done ours, only faster. I heard a huge noise before I reached the edge of the drop. The boulder had once more rejoined the world, its energy now at rest.

As it arrived at that rest, though, the boulder had done big work of its own, carving a huge hole in the streambed, deep enough to hide the bottom third of the boulder. The boulder had tumbled as it fell. What was hidden in the streambed had been the top, and what stared up at us now had been the bottom, beneath our levers.

Father took me by the shoulders and pulled me from the edge of the channel, calling to Mother as he did so. She cried out and knelt before me, pressing a bit of cloth to my face. I felt a sting.

The sting got worse, and I saw my blood on the cloth. When I had fallen before the boulder fell, my lever had broken free from my hands and caught me on the tip of my chin, cutting. It was not a deep cut—most of the

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lever's energy had gone into the boulder, only a little into my chin. I still have a mark there, although Mother had sealed my wound before we left the streambed.

Then we wailed together over what we had done, and how our efforts had changed the way things were meant to be.

Riding toward town in the wagonbed with the babies, I touched my fingers to the mark on my chin. Mother had fashioned our levers into pieces of the machine that would change water energy into our power. Some of my blood had been on my lever, and that blood was now part of our energy machine.

"Will the robots use levers to take apart our dam?" I said.

"Robots don't *need* levers," Mother said without looking at me.

"Even for the boulder?"

"Even for the boulder," she said.

"How will they move something big?" I said, and did not know, then, that this would be the last question I would ever ask them.

"They'll make it smaller first," Father said. "They'll make smaller rocks from that big boulder."

"They'll *dismantle* it," Mother said.

I looked up at the sky. My uncle and the others who would bring the machines back to life and dismantle our dam were there, falling, pulled toward me by gravity.

7

The roadway from our house to the town brought us past the broad flat area that had been the landing site before the shutdown.

I had seen it before, in person, and just yesterday on the viewer, but I had never even on the viewer seen so many people there. And I had surely never seen so many people so happy. Mostly, since the shutdown, people had not been happy. Today, though, they were, the distant ones waving and beckoning us to join them, the nearer ones coming even closer as we approached, welcoming.

The presence of so many people did not make the landing site seem any smaller. The site had room enough for everyone in town and all of us who lived outside the town to gather there without being crowded.

Father clucked the draybeasts to a halt in the shadow of one of the tall ships that had stood motionless in their berths since the moment the raiders from the Farback brought an end to the power we captured from the energy of our sun. Those ships had been closer to our sun than even our high floating suncatchers. More than that, those ships had been close to *other* suns and had felt the gravity of other worlds, as Father and Mother had felt the gravity of other worlds and felt the heat of other suns. The mark on my chin ached a little as I climbed to the edge of the wagonbed. I jumped and let our world's gravity bring my feet to the hard surface of the landing site.

I stumbled a bit and went to my knees. I put out my palms to catch my

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fall. The surface of the site was smooth as glass, *made*. But machine-made, no bumps or ridges or irregularities, perfect. We used sand and mud and gravel and water to make the mortar that held the rocks of our dam together, but it never came out smooth. I tried harder than either Father or Mother, but there were still drips and smears where I put my mortar, and even the best of my work was rough to the touch.

Kneeling, I looked up. Father and Mother were lifting the babies out of the wagonbed. People were gathering around them, talking and laughing. Beyond the tops of their heads, I could see the tops of the ships, pointed, sharp, higher than the town's tallest buildings, and higher than our dam would have been when finished.

Vargell Fulder was there, and he reached down a fat-fingered hand to help me to my feet. "Lots of us falling all over ourselves these past two days," he said as I brushed my palms together.

I helped Father unhitch the draybeasts and lead them to an area where they could graze. The grasses were tall there, evidently uncut and uncropped this whole season. As it was *meant to be*. The draybeasts began to chew.

Father put his arm around my shoulder as we returned to the wagon for the baskets of food. "They'll spend all their time grazing soon," he said.

"We won't need them any more," I said, careful that it not sound like a question.

"We'll need them to be *free*," Father said. "To roam and graze and find their own way. As they were meant to. As our stream will be free to flow along its own path. As *it* was meant to. As *we* will be free once more to have our machines change only that which must be changed so that we ourselves can live as we are meant to."

"Were—" I would *not* ask a question, although I did not doubt that what I most wanted were answers. "We built the machines," I said as flatly as I could.

Father looked across the landing site to where the ships towered tall. "Of course not," he said. "How could *we* build machines like those? Even the small ones? *Machines* build our machines, just as machines, our metalbeasts, build whatever else we need or want."

He began to walk to the landing site, and I followed.

After a few steps, Father stopped and turned to face me. He was smiling. "They build *for* us so that we do not have to. They build for us because they build *better* than us, and not just things we cannot build. They build *anything* better than us. They build everything *for* us."

"The landing site," I said. "The ships—"

"The roads, our *home*, all of it. They build because they are *meant to build*."

"A dam," I said softly but Father had no trouble hearing me.

"No," he said. "Not a dam to trap the waters, nor trees cut down other than those that must be for roadways to pass. No wood burned for heat or to cook with. *Real* food again." His smile grew wider, his eyes brighter as though he were seeing something beyond the landing site. "No metals torn from the world where they were *meant to* remain, but harvested by our machines from the spaces between the worlds and brought to us."

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"As it is *meant* to be," I said. He did not hear me, but kept speaking.

"No fields ripped open to grow food that can better be produced by our machines, nor beasts penned for slaughter when protein can be *made* with no harm." His voice sounded the way it had sounded when we worked together: *put this stone here,* he would say, *more mortar there.*

"Nor our dam," I said.

Father laughed at that, loud. "No," he said. "*Especially* not a dam so rough-built as ours was. Ugly. It will be fine to have it dismantled."

"By our machines," I said.

"By our machines and our metalbeasts," Father said, "putting things back as they are *meant to be*."

8

We did not return to our home for six days and their nights, and I did not ask a single question during any of that time.

But I *learned,* and I learned quickly, how *much* can be learned simply by *looking* without asking.

Everyone was celebrating, all joywails and thanksgiving, no forgiveness now being asked, because none was needed. With each moment, although it was not really quite so fast as that, a new machine or another metalbeast or system awakened, and set without hesitation to its particular task or tasks.

Their work was perfect, and accomplished without effort or weariness, as far as I could see. I tried to see them all.

Here, a squat shiny cube with six stubby legs moved across the surface of the landing site, gathering debris and removing stains that had collected over the years since the shutdown. There, long cylinders with tractor treads on either side moved along the roadway, repairing cracks, one of the cylinders following the roadway toward town, the other moving out of sight in the direction of our home.

At the far lip of the landing site, long tables had been set up and spread with the food and drink that had been brought, as well as firepits and smokeboxes over which food was cooked and kept warm.

On the second day after our arrival, two tall machines moved themselves into place near the tables and the fires. The stubby-legged cube, and other machines that had been performing similar functions, came as well, and deposited their collected refuse into receptacles on the sides of the tall machines, then departed to resume their tasks.

Within minutes, the air around the tables grew full and rich with the scents of cooking, but these aromas were not rising from the food my parents or the others prepared. The tall metalbeasts were the ones cooking now, although their sides and undersides remained cool to the touch. Father and Mother always clattered and clanked as they cooked, but the machines made no noise. The first dishes emerged from their innards within a very short while. The adults made loud joywails over the new food, sampling and tasting first this dish and then that, passing samples

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and tastes to those around them, feeding their children. I tasted some of what the machines had prepared and what I ate was indeed delicious, but I could not forget that it had been fashioned from refuse and detritus and debris, rather than from grains and grasses and the flesh of meatbeasts and wingbeasts. My parents made much of that—nothing had been killed or plucked or dug from the earth to feed us.

Not long afterward, the cookfires were allowed to burn down and then die out completely. By the next morning, the smoke was all gone. I tried to remember a time when there was no smoke in the air, but I could not. Within hours, the adults were gathering the last of the old food and feeding it into the metal cookbeasts. By late afternoon, the tables were laden once more, but now only with food that the machines had cooked. As the sun set, I ate my first full meal of that food, and found myself trying to remember what smoke had smelled like. I did not know how you could forget something so common so quickly, but I had.

It was during the middle of the fourth day in town that the great shout went up from the cluster of people surrounding the cluster of machines and metalbeasts working inside and outside and on top of the control and storage buildings that flanked the landing site. Some of them were the machines that Vargell Fulder had told us were the very first to be awakened. And they in turn had awakened others. Now the people near them were calling for Father and Mother. I followed them.

When we reached the others, Vargell wrapped a heavy arm around Father's shoulders and hugged him close. "Person-talk any time now," he said. With his free arm, he gestured at a machine in the center of the knot of people. Two metalbeasts worked behind it. The front of it was nearly filled with a large viewer, three times, maybe four times, the size of the one at our home. I wondered if the roadway-repairing metalbeast had reached our home yet. I wondered what our home looked like without smoke rising above it. I thought of our dam. We built small fires there sometimes, to cook over or to dry our clothes after we worked in the stream or made mortar.

Vargell had said that the person-talker would awaken soon, but it took a long time. The sun had moved a good distance toward nightfall when the machine at last gave a flicker, and then the viewer came to life with words and pictures.

"Message repeat loop," a man's voice said from inside the machine, but not from there at all, really. From the gatestation, or the ship between the gatestation and our world, moving toward us. The viewer held the image of our world, as our viewer at home had displayed that image just a few days ago.

But the world-view at home had been stored, *old,* and what I saw now was a new view. It looked much the same, though. Our world, where we live.

The man's voice repeated the same words several times before the picture of the world wavered as though water flowed over it, and was replaced by an image of the man himself. I did not have to be told that it was my uncle.

He looked a bit like my father, but clean-shaven, so it was hard to tell

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how close the resemblance was. He sat in a big chair surrounded by many machines and metalbeasts, with three people standing behind him. All of them wore clothes that were also clean, and looked as though they had never been torn and certainly never mended, at least not rough-mended, the way Father and Mother and other people mend things.

When my uncle smiled, the resemblance to my father became clearer. I looked at Father, and he was smiling a similar smile, although the corners of his eyes were wet.

"Greetings to the world and its rightful persons," Uncle Terry said. "My greetings and the wishes of those with me are yours from Ship *Harpsong* in gravity pulldown approach from the gatestation." His smile grew even wider. "Not fast enough for you, no doubt, but if you are receiving this message, then the sendaheads have done some of their work, and you can be assured that they will do more, and we will do still more when we arrive. It will not be long, a matter of days, fewer than ten, until gravity brings us close enough for our boats to descend."

The sendaheads, Mother had explained, had come faster than the person-ship, because the sendaheads were machines and metalbeasts, and could thus tolerate far higher rates of travel than meatbeasts of any sort, and usbeasts in particular. Gravity meant less to them, I think.

"We had good fortune, as did you, in re-opening the gate. A slowship was but eight years out from your sun when the raiders forced the shutdown. Diverting its course took a year, and then the eight years to reach your gatestation. Re-opening came quickly thereafter. As you see around you now."

Around me, people were joywailing, but softly, so as not to overpower the message, and embracing each other, and laughing and weeping all at once. I looked at Father, who had tears glistening in his beard.

Uncle Terry was talking about him—talking in fact *to* Father. "My brother. I have confidence that you, your wife, and your family, and the others of the world, have kept safe and well as best you have been able these years since shutdown. Not one day of those years have I ceased to ask for strength for your survival until we could re-open the gate, and your world could be returned to order, as it is—"

I thought of my smallest sister, of her dead in ground that would soon be the way it was *meant to be*. As my sister was meant to be as well, I supposed.

As, my uncle was now saying, any raiders would be soon. "Orbital sendaheads patrol for sign of raiders. Who will be eliminated."

Those around me nodded. Joy still shone on their faces, but many of them showed a grimness as well.

I took a step back from the crowd. Uncle Terry was talking now of the restoration of order to other worlds than our own, some of which would have to wait tens of years longer than we had to be restored to the *meant to be*.

I looked away from the machines and the people, out across the landing site to where the fields stretched and the hills rose. Great scars of open land showed on the hills where trees had been cut for lumber and fuel. Something glinted on one of those hills, a quick wink in the dying

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sunlight. A machine, I thought, a metalbeast already there and setting to the repair of what we had done to the forest, the land. I wondered how long it would take until no trace remained of what we had done with our hands, our tools, our selves.

9

There was a feast that night, the greatest of all feasts I had ever seen, although not a single dish on the long tables was cooked by a person.

On the viewer, Uncle Terry said the same things over and over again. No one seemed to grow tired of the message loop. Mother told me that in another day, two at the most, we would be able to speak directly to my uncle and the others on the ship. Not long after that, gravity would bring the ship close, and boats would bring my uncle *here*.

I filled my plate as high as anyone's, but I ate nothing. It did not matter—what was not eaten would be returned to the machines and then returned to us as other dishes.

At home, at our home as it had been, we were not allowed to leave food on our plates. At home, there had never been enough food to leave.

The night was clear, and over us the stars sat in place. Some lights in the sky moved, more of them than I was accustomed to. The brightest were the suncatchers that floated there as always. The smaller, faster-moving lights were the sendaheads going about their high work. Vargell Fulder thought he could see the light that was Uncle Terry's ship, but others said that it was too early to see that yet.

Father and some of the other men had prepared for the feast by removing their beards. Machines had made blades and soap, and had heated water, but the men had shaved themselves. Father looked different beardless, but not the way he had looked in the viewer of the old days or in my memory. He looked like my uncle.

More machines returned to life each hour. One, Mother told me, would be making new clothes by tomorrow. We would be properly dressed when the boats from the ship arrived.

My food sat untouched on the plate before me. No one noticed that I was not eating. I ran my fingers over the sleeves of the shirt Father had made for me, one of his own shirts that he had trimmed and cut and shaped until it was my size. There were rough ridges of cloth and thread where he had sewn the seams. My fingers traced the paths of those ridges.

The seams of mortar between the rocks of our dam were rough, too. I wanted to run my fingers over those seams once more before the dam was *dismantled*.

Some of the adults were drunk on wine and beer the machines had made. Mother made wine, too, but it took months to be ready. I had tasted Mother's wine once: bitter, good.

Father came close, and I smelled some beer. He put his arm around me, his own rough shirt brushing against my cheek. He put his face, now smooth, against mine. The beer smell was stronger now.

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"My *brother,*" he said. "My brother will be here soon."

"Things will change," I said.

Father shook his head without pulling away from me. It felt funny. "No. Things will go *back*. As they *should* be."

I put an arm around him. "I want—"

"*Whatever* you want," Father said. "*Anything* you want. Now."

I nodded with my face against his. "I want to show Uncle Terry our dam," I said. "Before the machines—"

Father belched against me and chuckled. "Good," he said. "He'll laugh."

I said nothing, and, after a moment, Father staggered away. I watched as he put his arms around Mother. Beyond them, I could see small lights in the hills where the trees had been cut down. There would be trees there again soon, as though none had ever been cut.

I'd helped cut down a tree on the bank overlooking the channel where we had started our dam. It fell hard to the ground, and we took branches and limbs from it to make fire near the piles of stones that were so hard to move, that we moved with such effort.

Some of those stones are there still, on the lip of the channel.

When I show Uncle Terry the dam, I will have him stand near the lip where those stones are balanced. I will stand beside him while he laughs at what we did and what we were able to do without machines.

Then I will push him from that lip, or send him below and push one of those stones down upon him, I am not sure which.

One or the other, though, and they are the same.

When I take my uncle to see our dam, gravity and I will kill him. ○

WHEN THE ALIEN SAT DOWN NEXT TO ME

When the alien sat down next to me,
if they hadn't told me he was alien,
if I didn't know such things,
I would have taken him for a human.

But they did tell me, and I do know,
So I stood up and walked away.

—Bruce Boston

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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

Crossover novels—ones that stretch beyond the confines of a single genre, such as SF mysteries or romantic fantasies—are fun for a lot of readers, lots of fun for writers, and a major pain for bookstore owners and marketing types. The problem has always been, where do you put the book so people will find it? There's a myth (not entirely untrue) that SF readers wouldn't be caught dead browsing in the romance section, or mystery readers in the SF section. Still, very few bookstores are willing to put a book (and it can't be just any book) in two different sections of the store. Unfortunately, this means that a lot of people who might actually enjoy crossover books aren't going to find them unless somebody points them out.

Well, as it happens, several of the books I've been reading lately are genre misfits of one sort or another. Whether this just reflects my taste, or whether there's an actual loosening up of genre boundaries, I'm not sure. But if you're in the mood for something that doesn't quite fit into the usual neat pigeonholes, take a look at some of these.

THE EYRE AFFAIR
by Jasper Fforde
Penguin, $14.00 (tp)
ISBN: 0-14-200180-5

This might be the ultimate crossover novel—SF, alternate history, mystery, romance, and literary laugh riot all in one.

Thursday Next works for SO-27, a British agency charged with preventing the corruption of literary texts. That's not quite as trivial or genteel a pursuit as it might seem: in Thursday's England, the classics of literature are the focus of mass fervor as intense as any sports team or rock group in our world. And, as we learn almost at the outset, the ability to travel in time makes meddling with the classics (not to mention other historical events) a strong possibility.

Understandably, in such circumstances, the historical setting differs from ours in many details. The Crimean War has been going on for over a century, a bloody stalemate. Wales (the author's own home territory) is an independent and decidedly unfriendly People's Republic. Shakespearean enthusiasts stage participatory productions of Richard III in the manner of "Rocky Horror." And somebody has begun meddling with the manuscript of Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit.*

Stopping the manuscript meddling is Thursday's job, one with significant consequences. In her world, the slightest alteration in the original manuscript is reflected in every printed copy of the work, horrifying the nation's passionate readers. As it turns out, Thursday's eccentric uncle has invented a device that allows entry into the world of famous literary works. And an arch-villain named Acheron has stolen the machine and is using it to kidnap beloved characters, holding them for ransom. The Chuzzlewit plot

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was bad enough; now Acheron is threatening to change the ending of *Jane Eyre!* Next thing she knows, Thursday finds herself in league with Mr. Rochester, doing her best to prevent one of the most beloved English novels from coming to the wrong ending.

Fforde plays in between the cracks of at least three genres, throwing in puns, allusions, and literary jokes with a liberal hand. The more you know about classical English literature, the funnier some parts are—for example, the sections where her slightly dotty uncle ends up stranded in one of Wordsworth's lyrical ballads, with the poet glaring at him for trespassing on his field of daffodils. Or Thursday's discussions with another agent about who *really* wrote Shakespeare's plays. . . . But Fforde has obviously read his share of science fiction, as well; you can almost see him grinning as he plays with the conventions of time travel and alternate history.

In the end, what ties the whole production together is Thursday herself, a spunky heroine whose cynical turn of phrase and quick wit are completely winning. Warning—this book is seriously addictive. And *The Eyre Affair* is just the first in a series. There are two more (*Lost in a Good Book* and *The Well of Lost Plots*) already out in the US, and another on the way from England. Read at your own risk.

THE ATROCITY ARCHIVES
by Charles Stross
Golden Gryphon, $24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 1-930846-25-8

Stross shows his versatility with this one, a playful cross between espionage fiction in the manner of Len Deighton and supernatural horror in the vein of H.P. Lovecraft.

Bob works for Capital Laundry Services—a bland name that conceals a government bureau responsible for protecting the nation against invasions of the kinds of entities that inhabit Lovecraft's worlds. We follow him on a mission to hack into a corporate computer containing a mathematical proof that could open up doors to weird dimensions from which eldritch horrors will undoubtedly emerge. Then, to reinforce the point, at a training session one of Bob's coworkers mishandles a spell and is instantly possessed by an alien intelligence. Bob reacts in time to prevent further damage, but the coworker is dead.

With that beginning, Bob's adventures escalate, with our hero combating threats from arcane creatures with a combination of advanced cybercraft and good old-fashioned leg work. The internal politics of Capital Laundry Services are a thoroughly amusing British bureaucratic tangle, and Bob's home life—shared with two hopeless roommates and a shifting cast of love interests—puts the whole adventure in a convincing twenty-first century milieu.

Stross's affection for the suspense and horror novels that are the inspiration for the plot elements is obvious. Equally obvious is his familiarity with the world and lifestyle of the technogeeks who make up a large percentage of his characters. So despite the superficial seriousness of the events that Bob is faced with, one can sense the author smiling behind the scenes.

The book consists of two novella-length pieces in the same setting, which holds out the possibility of still more in the same vein. That

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would be welcome—Bob is a thoroughly entertaining protagonist, and his suspension between the highest of high-tech worlds and the almost anachronistic Lovecraftian pantheon makes for a heady blend of fictional treats.

THE COYOTE KINGS OF THE SPACE-AGE BACHELOR PAD
by Minister Faust
Del Rey, $13.95 (tp)
ISBN: 0-345-46635-7

If you thought Canadians didn't do gonzo, think again—here's a debut novel that defies all expectations.

The primary characters are two Afro-Canadian fanboys, living in their own fantasy world of comics, videos, games, and books. Hamza and Yehat hold down marginal jobs (one washing dishes, the other clerking in a video store). Bright, articulate, and unworldly, they inhabit a bachelor pad in Edmonton where they devote all their energy to mastering trivia, building strange artifacts, reading SF, and trying to figure out why they don't have any real luck with the opposite sex.

Then a beautiful woman comes into Hamza's life: Velma, an African princess who has what appear to be superpowers. Hamza falls instantly in love, although Yehat tries to warn him not to get his hopes up. But Velma and Hamza seem to hit it off, and even Hamza's father approves of the match. Then, just as the love plot is beginning to warm up, weird things begin to happen.

What neither Hamza nor Yehat know is that Velma has come to Edmonton to enlist their help in combating a conspiracy that threatens the very foundations of society. A gang of local toughs, under the direction of two seemingly urbane bookstore owners, is distributing cream, a substance that most of the people who apply it think of as an addictive drug, but in reality saps the very life essence of its users. At the end, Hamza, Yehat, and Velma confront the evil-doers with far more than their own lives in the balance.

Faust takes a fair number of risks here, both in style and content. The narrative is in first-person present tense, shifting between several characters. His tone runs the gamut from comic book characterization to high poetic seriousness, with lots of nuances in between. (Each new character is introduced by a summary of attributes laid out in the form of a RPG player profile.) The dialogue of the two protagonists is heavily laced with hip-hop language and fannish in-jokes, and Hamza is a sincere if not always strictly observant Muslim. But with all these potential liabilities, the book as a whole works.

A very interesting new voice, bringing perspectives well outside the usual assumptions of genre SF to his work. Faust is obviously someone to watch.

OLYMPIC GAMES
by Leslie What
Tachyon, $14.95 (tp)
ISBN: 1-892391-10-4

The Olympian gods live into modern times in this debut novel by What, whose short fiction ought to be familiar to *Asimov's* readers.

Zeus and Hera lost their worshippers centuries ago, but they've hung on, somehow, and the opening of the book finds them in New York City. Both have enough divine power left to get by without having to do anything so mundane as work, and of course immortality lets them stay as young-looking as they want. And

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despite the passage of years and the changing currents of fashion, both the Olympians retain pretty much the same nature they displayed two thousand years ago, when they ruled the roost. Zeus is an egotistical womanizer, Hera the long-suffering stay-at-home wife.

Now Hera's decided to give Zeus a taste of his own medicine. She puts on her best appearance and goes to a trendy bar where Zeus regularly visits, planning to pick up someone on her own to make the old god jealous. But even the gods' plans don't always work out. After a series of mishaps, Hera finds herself pregnant—not by Zeus—and even more miserable than before, as the god decides to go wandering again.

His destination is upstate New York, where one of Zeus's old loves, the water nymph Penelope, has been released from a wooden door made from the tree into which he transformed her to hide her from Hera. She falls in love with a reclusive young artist, Possum, who nurses her through her recovery. Down in Manhattan, Zeus has become aware of her return to life; nostalgic for the days of his power, he goes looking for her.

Meanwhile, Hera has given birth to a monster—a half-insect child, who grows precociously. Threatened by doctors who want to take the child for medical research, she takes off on her own odyssey upstate—where, of course, all the various strands in the wildly imaginative plot begin to come together. . . .

Leslie What effectively turns her mythological materials into modern satiric fantasy, with plenty of sharp observations both on modern manners and on the eternal conflict between men and women. The ending is surprisingly poignant, without betraying the comic essence of the whole. Well-written, thought provoking, and easy to read.

NEWTON'S WAKE
by Ken MacLeod
Tor, $24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-765-30503-8

Here's a post-singularity space opera with a Scots theme and a radical political slant—just about what you'd expect from Ken MacLeod.

Lucinda Carlyle is one of an adventurous clan that has a monopoly in traffic through a series of interplanetary gates left in the wake of the Hard Rapture: a sudden explosion into superhuman powers for Earth's AIs, accompanied by a war that left Earth a near ruin and scattered the survivors around the galaxy. Opening a new gate on a previously isolated world called Eurydice, she and her crew encounter a leftover war machine too powerful to deal with—and suddenly her entire career spins out of control.

It's bad enough that she's gotten people under her command killed—even though everyone can be restored from backups, the loss of time and memory is a serious inconvenience. Much worse is that she's lost the Carlyle syndicate control of the gate complex, and she's set previously quiescent Eurydice on a path of independent development. The precarious power balance in the human-controlled areas of the galaxy looks ready to tip.

Events on Eurydice affect several interests. The Carlyles are essentially robber barons, exploiting their monopoly on a resource. On Eurydice, two parties contend for the balance of power: Runners, who fled Earth after the Hard Rap-

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ture, and Returners, whose program consists of resettling Earth with all those exiled. A Returner playwright has revived two folksingers whose work evokes the ancient days on Earth—but suddenly, with the war machine active, the political climate is much more dangerous.

Meanwhile, out in the system's asteroid belt, a miner's ship is taken over by self-replicating military drones—adding a significant new force to the conflict. Lucinda finds herself stripped of her rank in the family and sent back as a grunt. The revived folksingers reveal that much of the romantic legend surrounding them is complete hogwash. And excerpts from one of the Eurydicean playwright's works (Shakespearean plot and rhetoric cribbed to tell the tragedy of Leonid Brezhnev!) are hilarious.

MacLeod keeps so many balls in the air that following the plot is almost dizzying, and yet he manages to bring most of the strands to a satisfactory conclusion, pretty much at the same time. One of the most impressive examples of what's been called "the new space opera." Recommended.

EVOLUTION: The Remarkable History of a Scientific Theory
by Edward J. Larson
Modern Library, $21.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-679-64288-9

Finally, a straight-ahead history of science book, on the central issue of modern biology.

Larson begins his account in the late eighteenth century, when it was becoming hard to ignore the evidence that the biblical account of creation was full of holes. The French naturalist Georges Cuvier, who almost single-handedly invented paleontology, was the first to recognize that certain animals had become extinct. He invoked the biblical Flood to explain the extinctions, but not all his contemporaries were happy with that orthodox explanation.

Charles Lyell, an English geologist, made a key breakthrough when he postulated that the steady working of everyday processes over sufficient time explains the Earth's history better than a series of catastrophes. That insight, coupled with broad observation during his world cruise and the application of Malthus's population dynamics, sowed the seeds of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. Larson succinctly relates the familiar story of Darwin's discoveries, and the sensation that his publication of *Origin of Species* caused. He pays good attention to the supporting cast, with coverage of such important figures as T.H. Huxley and Alfred Russel Wallace.

But evolution would have been pretty much a curiosity if its impact had stopped there. Most biologists adopted the theory in some form or another, although its influence waned as its novelty wore off. But many non-scientists were deeply disturbed by the idea that humanity had evolved from some "lower" form. Antievolution forces continue to question the very foundations of the theory, especially in parts of the U.S.

For the most part, the late nineteenth century found scientists filling in gaps in the fossil record to make a strong case for evolution among such species as the horse—and, eventually, human beings. At the same time, several influential scientists proposed the use of selective breeding to improve the human

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species: eugenics, as it became known. This led in the long run to such horrors as the Nazi death camps and sterilization of the "unfit" in many countries (including the U.S.).

Meanwhile, Gregor Mendel had established the principles upon which heredity worked, making it finally clear that Lamarckism, the supposed passing on of acquired characteristics, played no part in evolution. Other scientists, working with fruit flies and additional experimental animals, confirmed and extended Mendel's insights. By the 1940s, it had become clear that heredity was a matter of biochemistry—a science that was to become a major growth area in the second half of the twentieth century.

With the discovery of the structure of DNA, any remaining questions about the mechanisms of Mendelian heredity were answered. The story since the 1950s consists primarily of fine-tuning the details of the theory. The sequencing of the genomes of several living species—including our own—opens the door to practical applications far beyond anything that Darwin and his contemporaries could have imagined.

This solid history of the single most important principle in biological science is a very good addition to Modern Library's useful offering of classics in all fields. ○

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SF Conventional Calendar

Fall is traditionally a very popular season for science fiction conventions. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con six months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

OCTOBER 2004

15–17—**CapClave.** For info, write: **4030 8th St. S., Arlington VA 22204.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) wsfa.org. (E-mail) capclave@keithlynch.com.** Con will be held in: Tysons Corner VA (near DC) (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Marriott. Guests will include: Nick Pollota, Butch Honeck, Dennis McCunney.

15–17—**NecronomiCon. stonehill.org.** Crowne Plaza, Tampa FL. Spider & Jeanne Robinson, Lloyd Kaufman. SF/fantasy.

15–17—**ConStellation. con-stellation.org.** Holiday Inn Express, Huntsville AL Watt-Evans, Friesner. General SF/fantasy.

15–17—**AngliCon. (206) 789-2748. anglicon@rocketmail.com.** SeaTac Radisson, Seattle WA. UK media & Harry Potter.

16–17—**Ireland Nat'l. Con. octocon.com.** Glen Royal Hotel, Maynouth, Co. Kildare. T. Lee, McCaffrey, Harrison.

22–24—**MileHiCon. (303) 657-5912. milehicon.org.** Marriott SE, Denver CO. C. de Lint, Moon, Saberhagen, Eggleton.

22–24—**ConClave. conclavesf.org.** Holiday Inn S., Lansing MI. T. Huff, H. Bruton, B. & S. Childs-Helton, M. Fabish.

22–24—**VegaCon. (877) 881-5207. vegacon.com.** Plaza Hotel, Las Vegas NV. Steven Brust, Kathy Mar. SF/fantasy.

22–24—**ValleyCon. valleycon.com.** Fargo ND. Terry Brooks, Ben Bova, Boris Vallejo, Julie Bell, Lani Tupo. SF/fantasy.

22–24—**InCon. (509) 489-0837. inconsf.org.** Mirabeau Park Hotel, Spokane WA. David Weber, Robert Daniels.

28–31—***World Fantasy Con, c/o Box 26665, Tempe AZ 85285. (480) 945-6890. leprecon.org.*** J. Wurts, E. Datlow.

29–31—**JVL Con, 1316 Monterey Ln, Janesville WI 53546. (608) 758-7320. si-fi-nut.com.** Barbara Marsh, C. Toy.

29–31—**HallowCon, 395 Stancil Rd., Rossville, GA 30741 hallowcon@vel.net.** Chattanooga TN. Horror.

29–31—**Ohio Valley Filk Fest, 3824 Patricia Dr., Columbus OH 43220. ovff@ovff.org.** N. Dublin OH. SF folksinging.

29–31—**RingCon, WRFF, 12016 134th Ave. KPN, Gig Harbor WA 98329. (800) 359-5948.** ringcon.com. Seattle WA.

29–31—**VulKon, Box 297122, Pembroke Pines FL 33029. (954) 441-8735. vulkon.com.** Nashville TN. Commercial con.

29–31—**Anime USA, Box 1073, Herndon VA 20172. animeusa.org.** Sheraton, Tysons Corner VA (near DC).

NOVEMBER 2004

5–7—**TusCon, Box 2528, Tucson AZ 85702. (520) 571-7180 (fax). basfa@earthlink.net.** Innsuites Hotel. Barb Hambly.

5–7—**OryCon, Box 5464, Portland OR 97228. (503) 422-6574. orycon.org.** J. Oltion, M. Roland, J. Heddle. SF/fantasy.

5–7—**United Fan Con, 26 Darrell Dr., Randolph MA 02368. (781) 986-8735.** Marriott, Springfield MA. SG-1, Dr. Who.

5–7—**NovaCon, 379 Myrtle Rd., Sheffield S2 3HQ, UK. (0114) 281-1572.** Quality, Walsall UK. Ian Watson. Big UK con.

6–13—**CruiseTrek, 23852 Pacific Coast Hwy. #385, Malibu CA 90265. (310) 456-7544. cruisetrek@aol.com.** Caribbean.

12–14—**WindyCon, Box 184, Palatine IL 60078. windycon.org.** Radisson O'Hare, Rosemont IL. Sawyer, Jael, Dobson.

12–14—**ArmadaCon, c/o Pritchard, 4 Gleneagle Ave., Plymouth PL3 5HL, UK.** Copthorne. Fanthorpe, B. Pearson.

13–14—**Phoenix Con, Yellow Brick Rd., 8 Bachelors Walk, Dublin 1, Ireland. slovobooks.com.** J. McKenna, Duane.

19–21—**VulKon, Box 297122, Pembroke Pines FL 33029. (954) 441-8735. vulkon.com.** Orlando FL. Commercial event.

AUGUST 2005

4–8—**Interaction, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk.** Glasgow Scotland. $170/£95.

SEPTEMBER 2005

1–5—**CascadiaCon, Box 1066, Seattle WA 98111. www.seattle2005.org.** The NASFiC, while WorldCon's in Glasgow. $75.

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NEXT ISSUE

JANUARY ISSUE

Next issue, the January 2005 issue, is the first issue with new editor Sheila Williams's name on the masthead, and so an important milestone and new beginning in the history of the magazine.

So let's see what Sheila's going to bring next month:

The cover story is by multiple Hugo and Nebula-winner **Connie Willis**, the most honored author in the history of the field, who returns with a new novella that gives us a shrewd and amusing look at the world of phony psychics, mediums, and channelers, where some bizarre surprises await a pair of intrepid skeptics who attempt to investigate a very unusual "Inside Job."

But that's not all, by any means.

ALSO IN JANUARY

Critically acclaimed author **Susan Palwick** returns after too long an absence with a bittersweet and funny look at "The Fate of Mice," told from a peculiar viewpoint (one of the mice!); Hugo- and Nebula-winner **Larry Niven** warns us about the dangers, some subtle and some not-so-subtle, of hanging out with the "Rhine-maidens"; **Bruce McAllister**, one of the most respected figures in eighties SF, returns after *much* too long an absence to describe a boy's cryptic relationship with a "Water Angel"; **Phillip C. Jennings** gives us a ringside seat, maybe a bit TOO close for comfort, for the "Invasion of the Axbeaks"; and new writer **Matthew Jarpe** takes us along on a suspenseful guided tour of the "City of Reason."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column delivers the news that "Gardner Moves On"; **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; and a special feature by **Roger Ebert**, the most famous movie reviewer on television, examines his roots as an SF fan, as he discusses "How Propeller-Heads, BNFs, Sercon Geeks, Newbies, Recovering GAFIAtors, and Kids in Basements Invented the World Wide Web, All Except for the Delivery System"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our January 2005 issue on sale at your newsstand on November 16, 2004. Or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the fantastic stuff we have coming up for you next year (you can also subscribe to *Asimov's* online, in varying formats, including in downloadable form for your PDA, by going to our website, *www.asimovs.com*).

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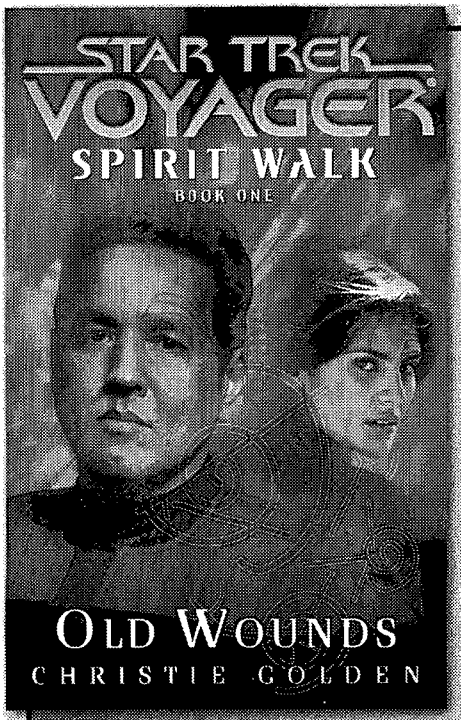

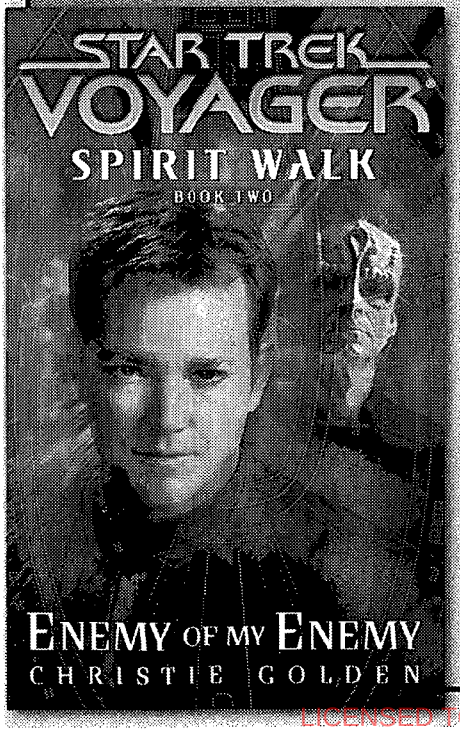

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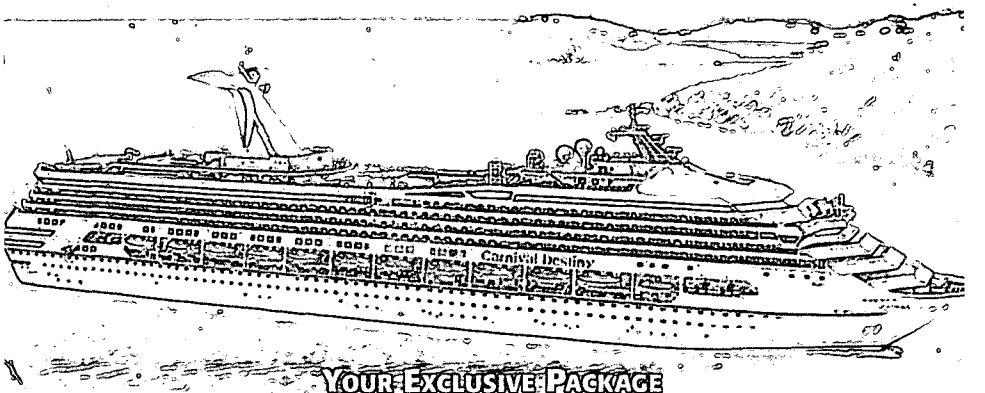

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